
الفنون والعمارة الاسلامية في ليبيا
ISLAMIC ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN LIBYA

الفنون والعمارة الإسلامية في ليبيا

ISLAMIC ART AND ARCHITECTURE IN LIBYA

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CATALOGUE FOR THE EXHIBITION PUBLISHED BY THE LIBYAN GENERAL COMMITTEE FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE WORLD OF ISLAM FESTIVAL IN CO-OPERATION WITH THE ARCHITECTURAL ASSOCIATION LONDON APRIL 1976

This is the first major Exhibition of Islamic Art and Architecture in Libya. It has been arranged to coincide with the World of Islam Festival, taking place in London in Spring 1976. Although the restricted time in which it has been prepared has inevitably limited its scope, the Exhibition is intended to give an idea of the variety of Islamic Art and Architecture in Libya and has been divided into three parts: The Old City of Tripoli, Recent Archaeological Investigations, and Vernacular Architecture. These are all illustrated by photographs, plans, maps, and a selection of objects which appear for the first time outside Libya. It is hoped the Exhibition will attract Islamic scholars – as well as those interested in art and architecture in general – to the Islamic tradition of Libya. I should like to thank all those who have kindly cooperated with the Committee for the Exhibition, especially the Libyan General Committee for the participation in the World of Islam Festival, the Department of Antiquities of Libya, the Libyan Embassy in London, and the Chairman and Staff of the Architectural Association.

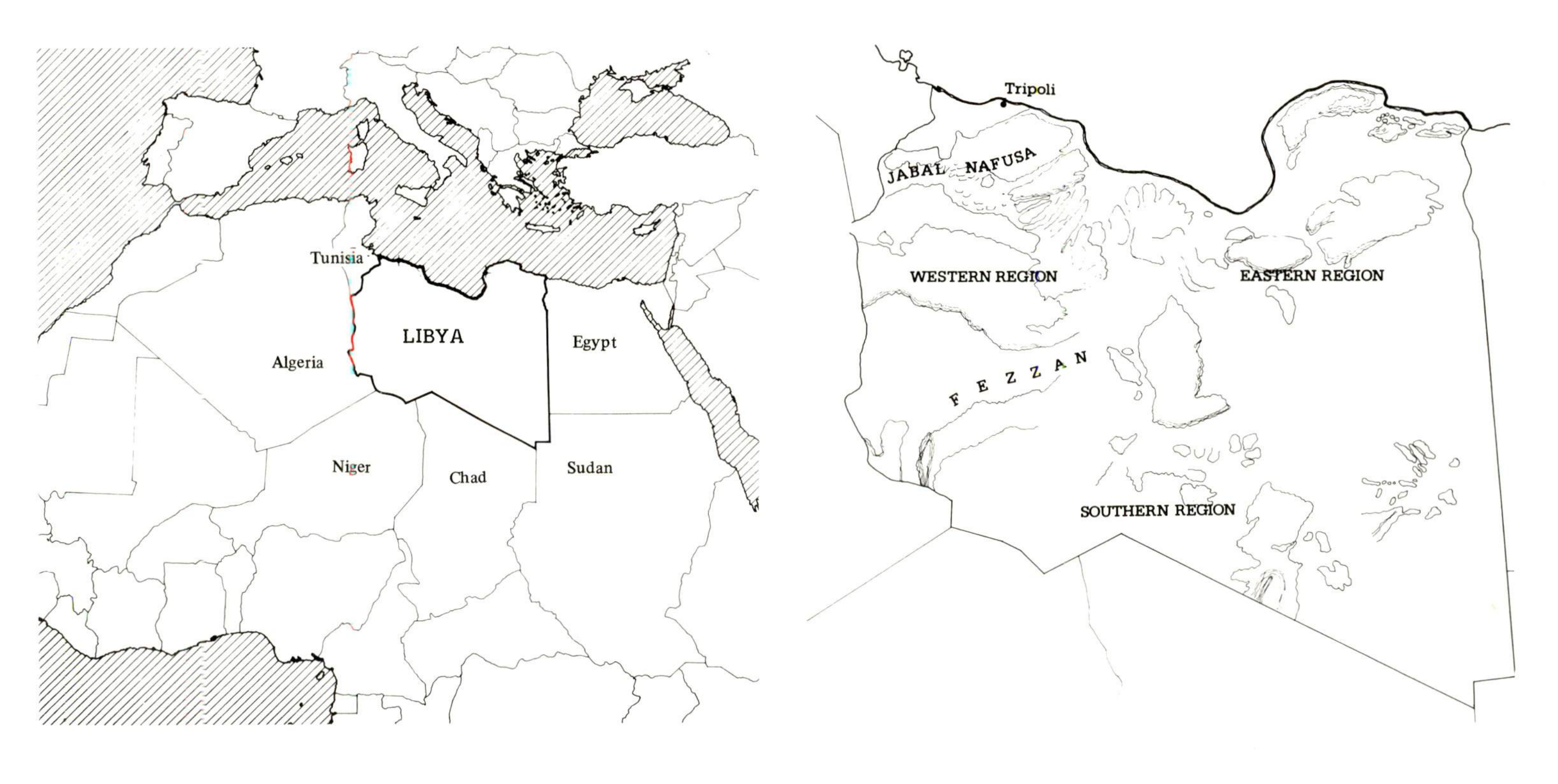
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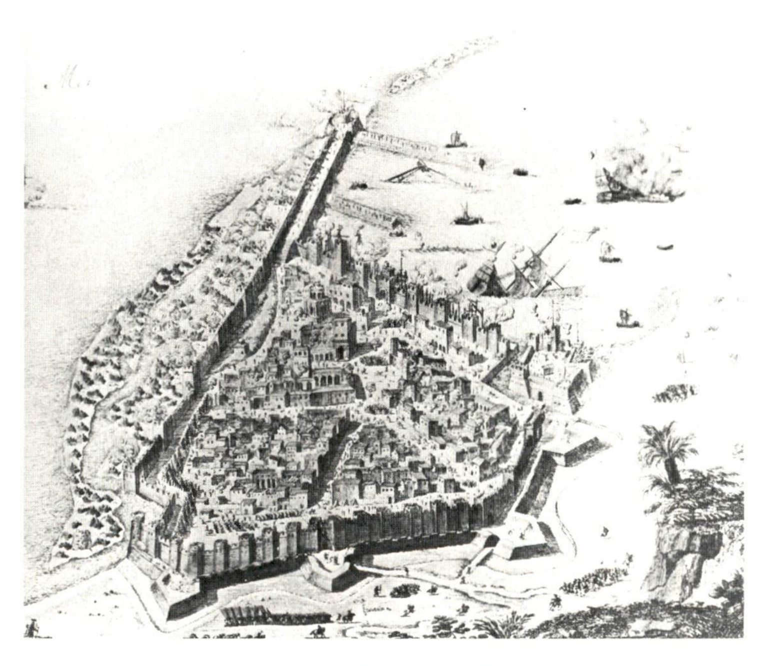
The Architectural Association is privileged to host this major exhibition of Islamic Art, Architecture and Archaeology from Libya on the occasion of the World of Islam Festival. It is the first time that such an extensive exhibition on the historical and cultural background to the Republic of Libya has been seen in London.

The Architectural Association, with a long tradition of international contact and exchange in the areas of education, architecture and design, and situated in the heart of London is an appropriate location for this Exhibition to be shown. We have welcomed the opportunity not only to assist in the preparation and presentation of the display, but also to be able to present a supporting programme of lectures and events that contribute academically and culturally to the richness of the Association, its School, and to the wider public of Britain.

The presentation of this Exhibition has been the product of active and enthusiastic co-operation between many people both here in London and also in Libya and it is our wish that the spirit that has been created continues and flourishes.

Alvin Boyarsky
Chairman of the Architectural Association
School of Architecture


Tunisia
LIBYA
Algeria
Egypt
Niger
Chad
Sudan
Tripoli
JABAL NAFUSA
WESTERN REGION
EASTERN REGION
FEZZAN
SOUTHERN REGION



In 1685 Tripoli was attacked by the French fleet. This view of the city shows the elaborate fortifications, surrounded by a moat, designed to withstand cannon warfare. The castle at one corner guards both the town and the port. Of interest are the wide streets (probably exaggerated by the European artist), and the mosques with square minarets.

The old walled city of Tripoli on the north African coast displays many features typical of Islamic towns. Its urban fabric, as well as its important monuments, express many of the characteristics of a city culture which was developed in the Islamic world. Like many other Islamic towns, the history of Tripoli is complex, extending back into pre-Islamic times with, for example, the celebrated triumphal arch erected by Marcus Aurelius in 163 AD. When walking through its narrow streets it is not unusual to come across Roman columns which have been re-used as building material.

The importance of Tripoli was ensured through the centuries by its fertile hinterland of irrigated fields and olive groves, whose grain and oil were exported throughout the Mediterranean by ships that crowded its port. Many different dynasties were to rule over the city after the coming of the Arabs and the Islamic religion in the 7th century. These included periods of European domination – the Knights of St. John the Baptist in the 14th century, the Spanish in the 16th century and the Italians in the present century. Most of the buildings that may now be seen in the Old City date from the period of the Ottomans, who governed Libya in the 16th–20th centuries, through the brilliant Qarahmanli dynasty.

Like other cities whose life has been continuous over many centuries, the Old City of Tripoli has often been rebuilt. The Roman city was surrounded by walls, and in medieval time the gateways were strengthened to ensure greater security. The walls which are now visible (they have been partly restored by the Italians) are probably built over the remains of ancient fortifications. The walls enclose the town roughly in an uneven triangle, the long side of which runs beside the sea, extending out into the water to create a sheltered harbour. A comparison between a 17th century view of the city and the present town indicates how much of the essential scheme has been preserved. Today, of course, the elaborate fortifications necessitated by cannon warfare have been removed, though the steep battered walls still remain. At one corner of the city is the Qasr, or castle, to which each successive ruler added or modified a portion. In itself the castle is a miniature city, with narrow lanes and interconnecting courtyards, presenting a fascinating example of truly eclectic building in which are juxtaposed Roman columns, Byzantine

capitals, 14th century crenellated walls, tile panels from the Turkish period, and fanciful Italian additions. Its raised gardens with swaying palm trees and inscribed fountains add to the picturesque effect. The castle functioned, until recently, as the focus of power, guarding both the city and the sea.

One of the characteristic features of Islamic towns is the institution of *waqf* – by which rulers endowed their cities with buildings for public use. Tripoli is particularly rich in such foundations and has many mosques which were lavishly built. In their plans the Tripoli mosques present a variety of arrangements of columned sanctuaries divided into bays, sometimes by re-used antique columns. Each bay is usually surmounted by a dome – as in the al-Naqah mosque, which is linked with the 11th century Fatimid rule. The *mihrabs* of the mosques (the niches which show the direction towards Mecca for prayer) are decorated, and that of the notable al-Qarahmanli mosque from the 18th century, is enriched with different coloured stones. The *minbars* (from which the Friday sermon is given) are also lavishly treated. The interiors of the domes of the al-Qarahmanli mosque are covered with stucco, and the wooden ceilings of the side and upper aisles are painted. These mosques are often combined in a complex of other structures which include schools, baths, and minarets. The variety of minarets in Tripoli – they appear prominently above the crowded streets directing the faithful to prayer – indicates a meeting of different architectural influences: thus, we find the typically North African square minaret with crenellations, as in the mosque of al-Naqah, and the octagonal or circular minarets with tapered finials, in the mosques of Mahmud and al-Qarahmanli. Particularly characteristic of the Tripoli mosques from the Turkish period are the large surfaces of coloured glazed tilework covering the walls. Incorporated into many of these mosque complexes are extensive tomb areas in which the bodies of the founders of the mosque, together with the members of their families, are buried. A further example of a royal foundation may be seen in the buildings that have survived from the 17th century ruler Uthman Pasha. His *madrasa*, or school, combines student quarters with a central courtyard and cloisters. Uthman Pasha was also responsible for the building of a *hammam*, or bath, which is connected with a later mosque.

The anonymous facades of the streets in old Tripoli are no preparation for the rich life concealed behind them. The essentially internally directed life within the Islamic household is ideally reflected in the courtyard house construction, a house type which can be easily adapted to the climate: the inward centering on the courtyard results in cool shady rooms in the summer, and in winter there is a minimum loss of heat. The style is also adaptable to differences in economic means. The same form can be used in the house of a poor man when its simplicity would be marked; or when adorned with marble columns, tile work and richly carved wooden balconies, it reflects the lifestyle of the very wealthy. The old city of Tripoli is particularly rich in a number of these great courtyard houses, dating from the Turkish period.

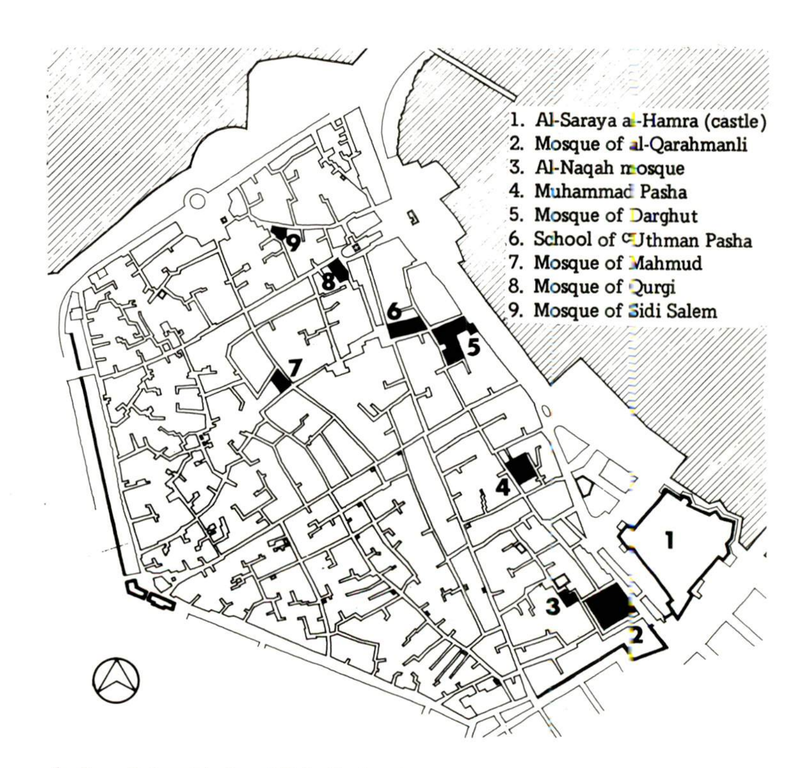
This style of house construction has also been particularly well adapted to the organic growth of the city – the great houses form 'island' blocks linked by an irregular street pattern, which is far from that of the earlier pre-Islamic classical grid system. These 'islands' are sometimes linked by common walls to form streets, but each of the houses has been built to its own plan and size with no particular concern for the overall external picture. It is essentially an architectural form which is marked by individuality and a concern for, and total involvement with, the family as a group.

Situated at the end of one of the major caravan routes linking the Mediterranean with the east via the Red Sea and beyond, Tripoli has always been a city of rich markets with attendant hotels and caravanserais. Unfortunately, nothing remains of constructions earlier than the 18th and 19th centuries. These hotels or *funduqs* also follow the courtyard house construction formula. Each *funduq*, allowing for variations in size and cost factor, consists basically of a single entrance hall leading to a central courtyard. This courtyard is surrounded by arcades on two floors, off which open a series of rooms. Access to the upper storeys is generally by means of an open staircase rising from the central courtyard, but it is occasionally achieved by means of a stairwell set within one of the angle rooms. The lower storey is mostly used for storage, while the upper floor serves both to house the merchants and also the tradesmen and their workshops.

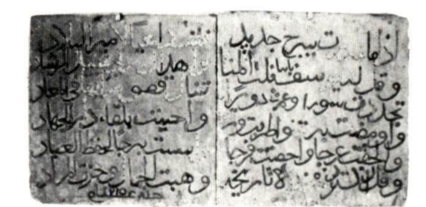
The streets of the Old City are narrow and follow no superimposed grid system. They provide an abundant example of the principles of organic growth, transforming themselves into *suqs* or street markets wherever these are required. One of the *suqs* of Tripoli is now found positioned between the castle and mosque of al-Qarahmanli. Another *suq*, that of al-Raba, is roofed with cross vaults of brick. Significantly, the streets link the houses rather than separate them. The colours of the houses are white and pastel pink and blue-green, and are brilliantly illuminated in the sun in contrast with the clear blue of the sky. To prevent buildings from collapsing into the narrow streets, and also to dissuade invading horsemen from riding through the city, arches are employed to span from one side of the street to the other. This feature, which effectively filters the strong light, is known in many other Mediterranean towns, but is used here with a strong feeling for the picturesque.

Naturally, old Tripoli now faces dangers from the pressures that are inevitably applied upon its space by a city that is rapidly expanding around it. It is to the credit of the Department of Antiquities of Libya that these dangers have been recognised and that a programme of study and conservation has been embarked upon so that the life and architectural tradition of the city may continue.

Antony Hutt
George Michell



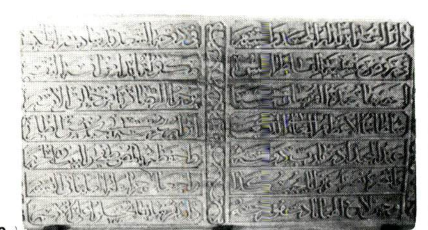
A plan of the old city of Tripoli, showing some of the principal monuments. The plan has not substantially altered since the 17th century, and subsequent development has been outside the city walls. Streets follow no grid layout and there is no single commercial centre: the various *suqs* in Tripoli are associated with the mosques of the town, which are indicated here.



This marble slab has its inscription inlaid in metal. It is probably from a tower, and records a restoration to the city walls by a local governor, Yusuf Qarahmanli in 1837.

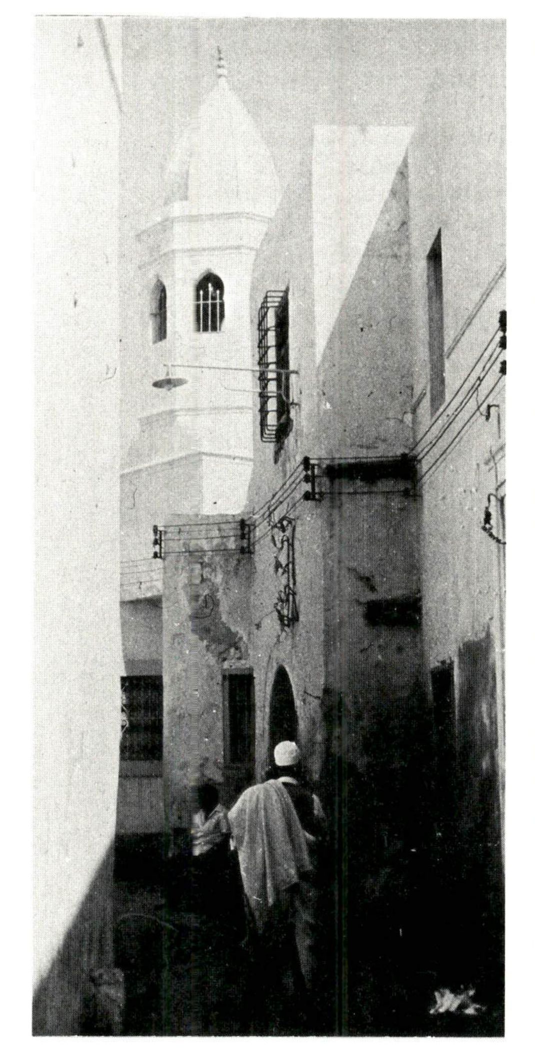
Part of the walls of the old city, with a gateway and bridge over the moat. Little of these walls predate the Ottoman period (16th–20th century), but there can be little doubt that they were built over the remains of older walls, possibly extending back to Roman times.

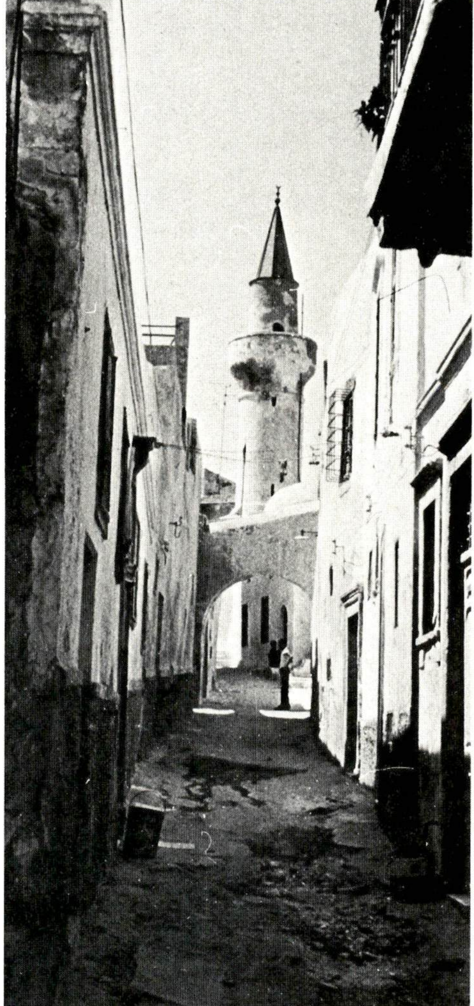
Gateway in the city walls, which are constructed of rubble faced with finely dressed stonework.

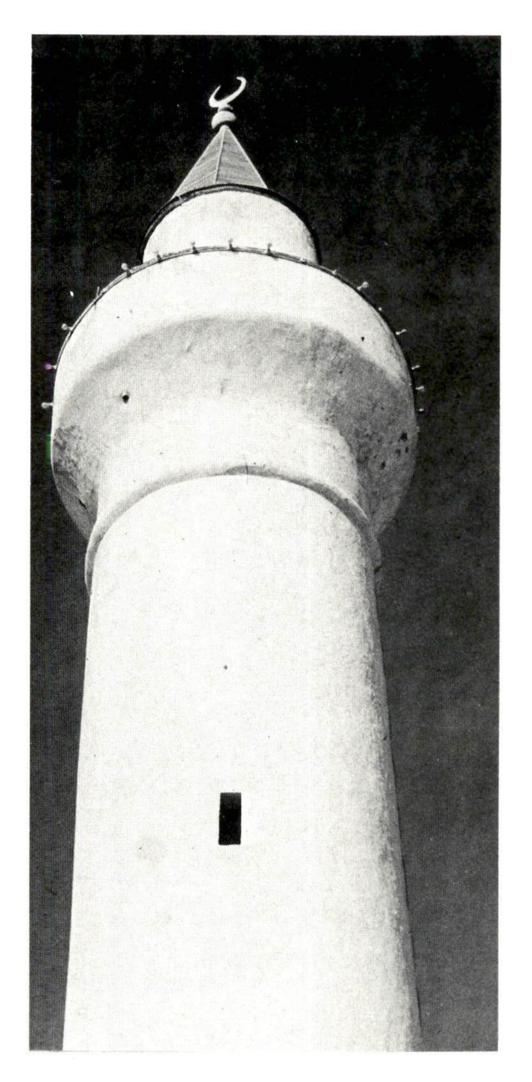


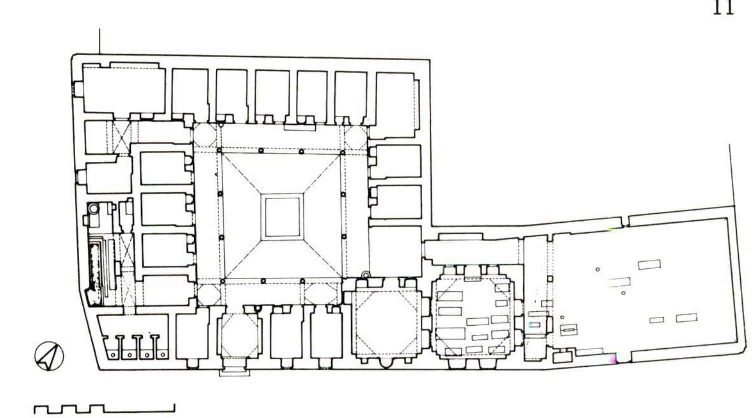
Important inscriptions are often found on these gateways. This carved marble inscription dates from the late 19th century, and mentions an army camp, presumably outside the city walls.

The minarets of the mosques in the old city dominate the streets, indicating the location of the mosques, which are otherwise concealed behind plain walls. These minarets belong to the mosques of Mahmud, Sidi Salem, and al-Durug.







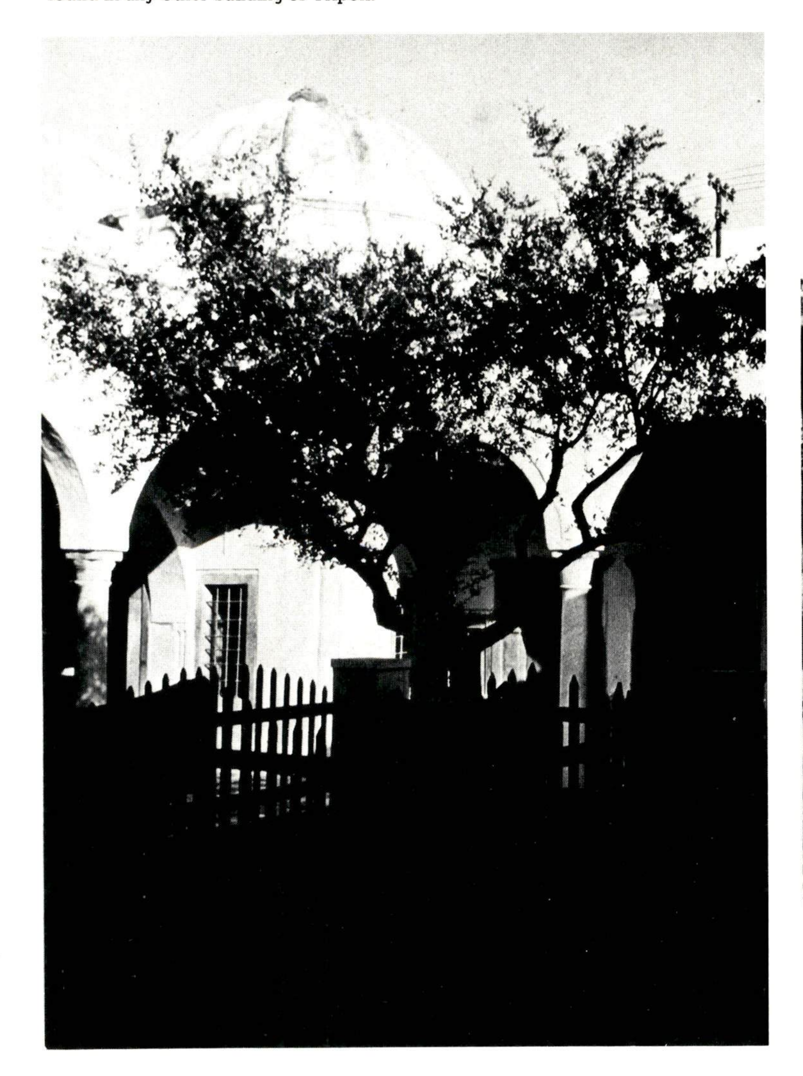


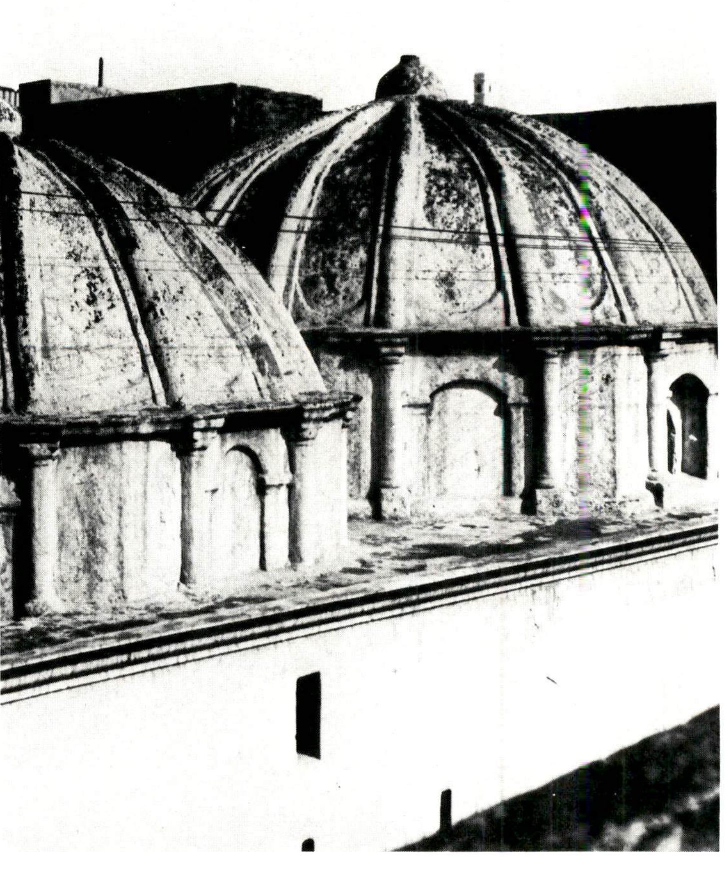
Built in 1654 by the ruler of Tripoli, this complex consists of a small mosque, accommodation for students, a tomb, and a small cemetery.

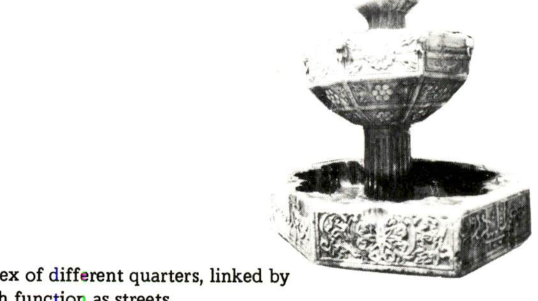
The rooms for the students open off the courtyard. Each is a small rectangular vaulted room with a wooden platform inside, serving as a bed, and storage space beneath.

The tomb and the mosque of the school are covered with unusually ribbed domes.

These are supported on octagonal drums, which have pilasters in line with the ribs. These features are not found in any other building of Tripoli.

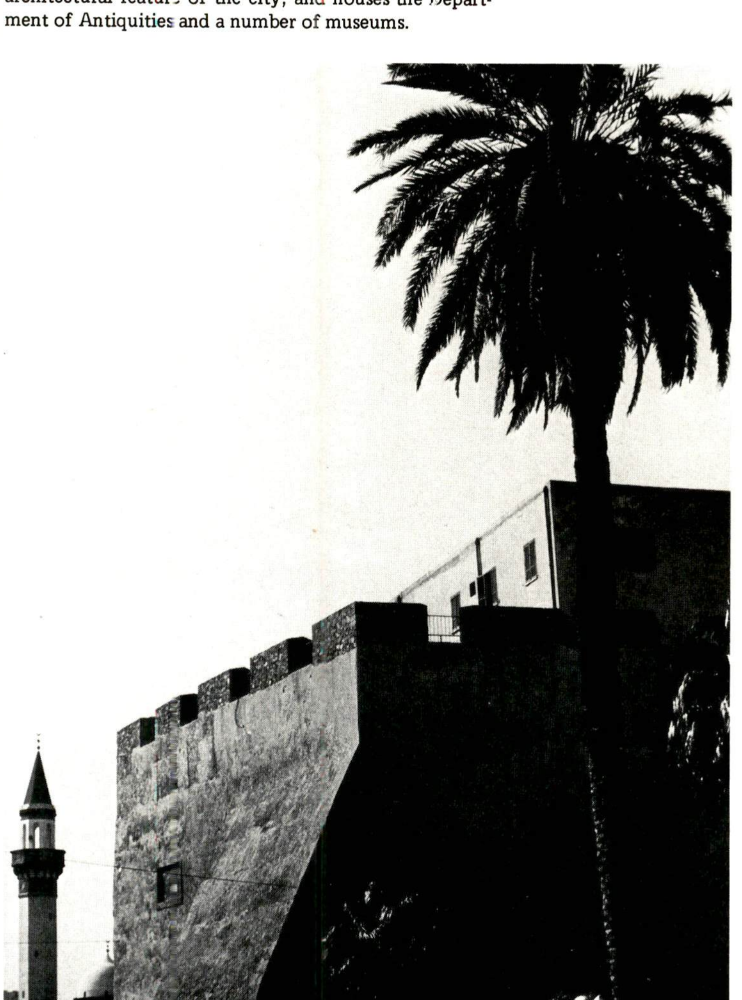






Probably going back to Roman times, the fortified castle of Tripoli has been occupied and added to by the rulers of the city. It stands today as the most prominent architectural feature of the city, and houses the Department of Antiquities and a number of museums.

The interior is a complex of different quarters, linked by arcaded corridors which function as streets.





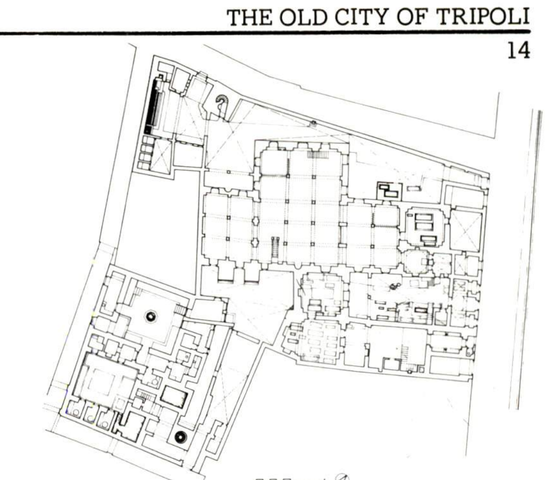
The coloured glazed tiled panels reflect the taste of local artists under the Qarahmanli dynasty. The profusion of foliage and bird forms suggests contacts with Ottoman and European ceramic art.



The many courtyards at different levels within the castle provide focal points for the self-contained quarters. They have carved stone fountains and are surrounded by open arcades, sometimes employing reused Roman and Byzantine columns.



MOSQUE OF DARGHUT



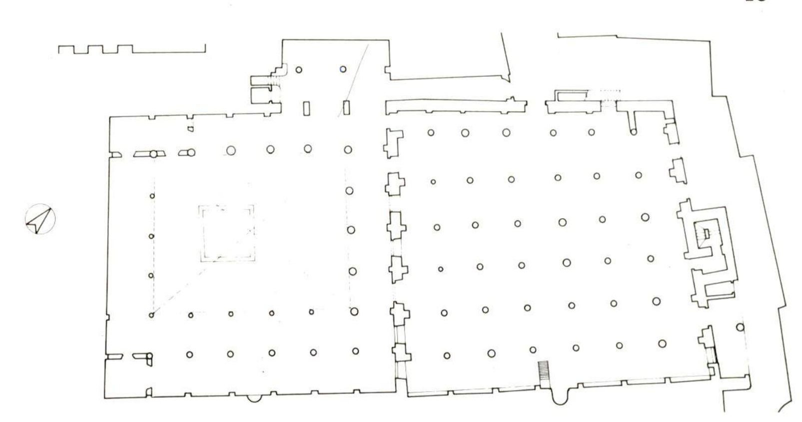
This mosque is one of the largest in Tripoli, and is named after a 16th century governor. The unusual T-shaped sanctuary is connected to a number of tomb chambers and a later bath. Recent restorations have revealed that the mosque was built on the site of an older structure, possibly a church.

The roof of the sanctuary is a sequence of half spheres, with curious surmounting discs.

The mosque was built in 1698, and is remarkable for its finely carved stone doorways. Similar doorways are found in the houses of old Tripoli (see pp. 22, 23) indicating the relation between mosque and house architectural decoration.

This carved timber door, with foliage, trees, and crescents, is typical of those from the mosque.



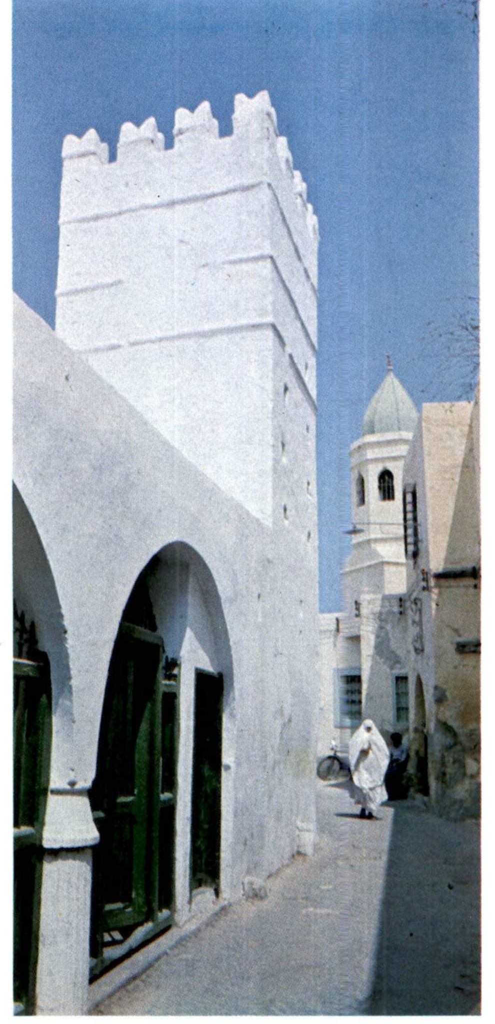


This mosque is probably the oldest surviving in Tripoli, and has suffered many restorations. Legends associate the mosque with the first Arab ruler of Tripoli, ^{c}Amr Ibn al-^{c}As, and also with a later Fatimid Caliph. The sanctuary is divided into square bays, each of which is surmounted by a dome. The almost-square courtyard was originally surrounded on four sides by an open arcade.

Inside the sanctuary (see cover) ancient reused columns support a series of arches from which rise the domes. The non-directional visual effect is characteristic of Tripoli mosque interiors.

The courtyard also uses ancient columns for its simple arcade.

The minaret is a simple square tower with crenellations, and may date from the 17th century restoration. Access to its internal staircase is from the sanctuary.



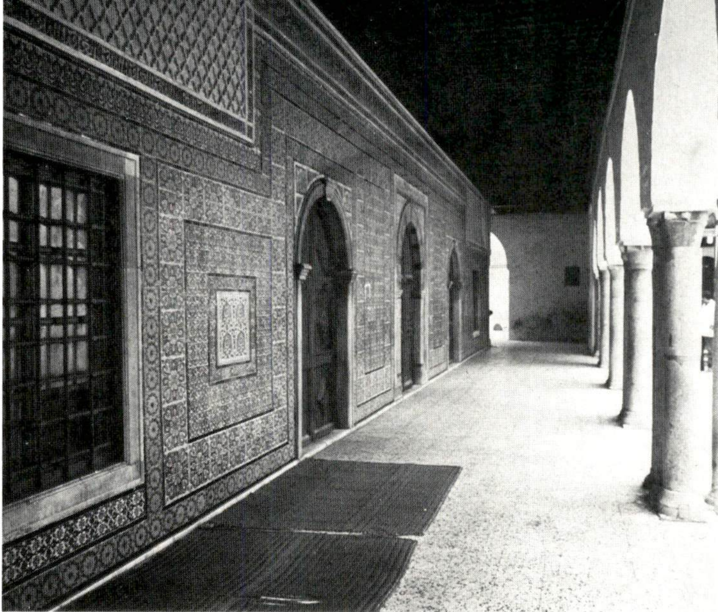
MOSQUE OF AL-QARAHMANLI

This is the most celebrated mosque in Tripoli, built by the most famous ruler of the city in 1736-8.

The square sanctuary is connected to irregular shaped tomb chambers, an open courtyard, and a school for religious instruction. Together with washing facilities and the minaret, the whole forms an architectural complex. The orientation of the sanctuary towards Mecca displays no relation to the streets which border the complex.

Ahmad al-Qarahmanli and his family are buried in various tombs, with their faces turned towards Mecca. The graves of important men are marked by stone replicas of the turban which the deceased would have worn.



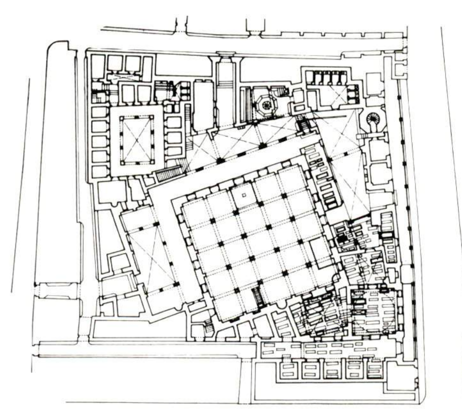


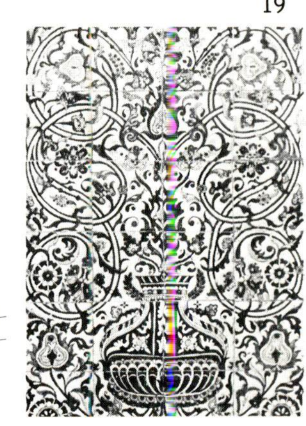
The outer walls of the sanctuary are completely covered with coloured glazed tile panels.

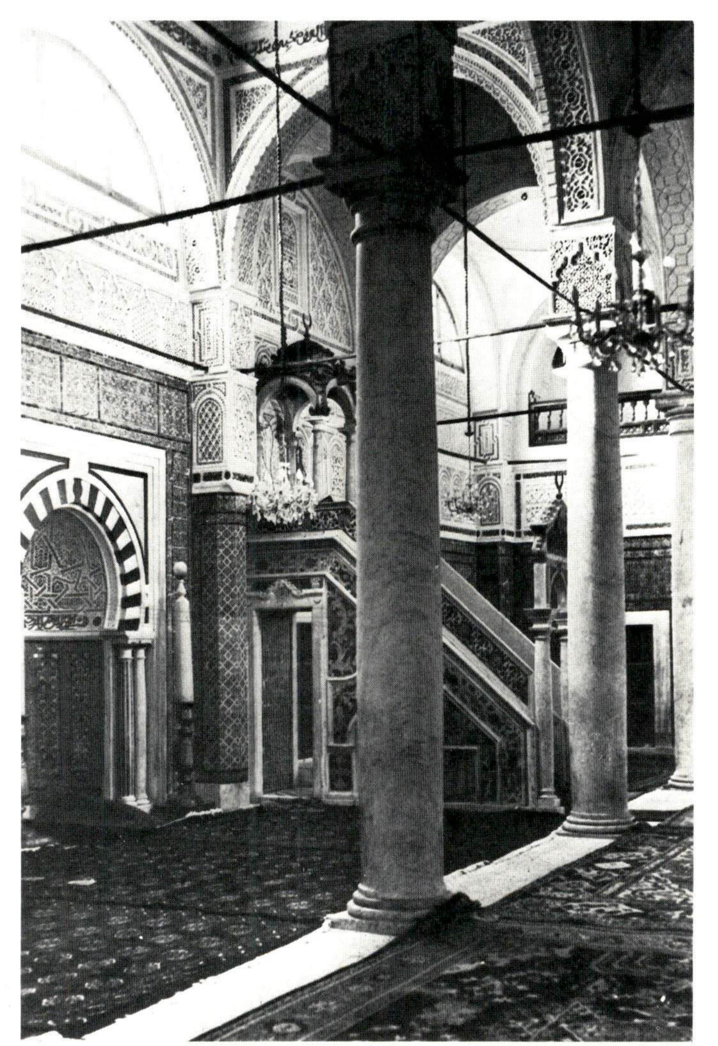
The designs of these highly coloured tile panels all derive from flower and foliage forms, organised in a strict geometric grid.

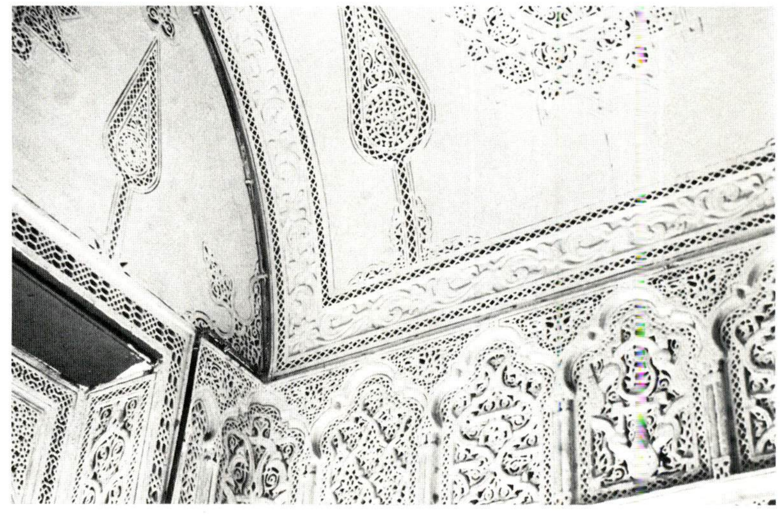
The vase and foliage motif is a theme of panels which are particularly emphasised by strong borders.

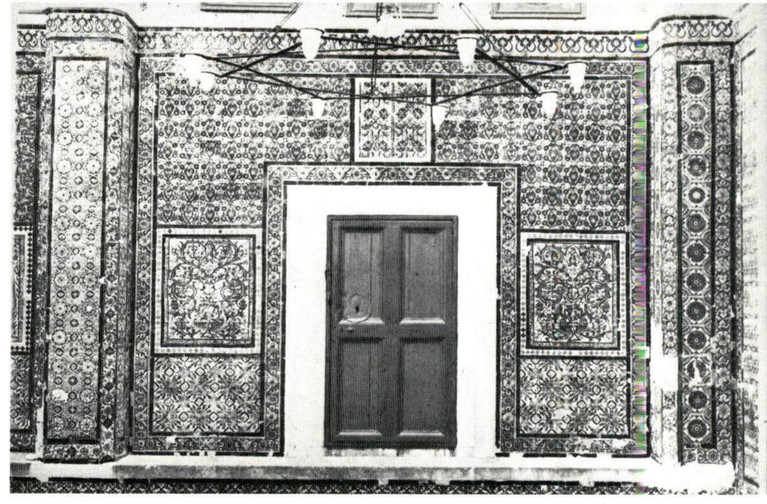
The interior of the sanctuary is richly decorated with carved stucco in geometric and calligraphic designs. The domes are supported on corner squinches, themselves half-domes. The *mihrab* and *minbar* are created in multi-coloured stonework.

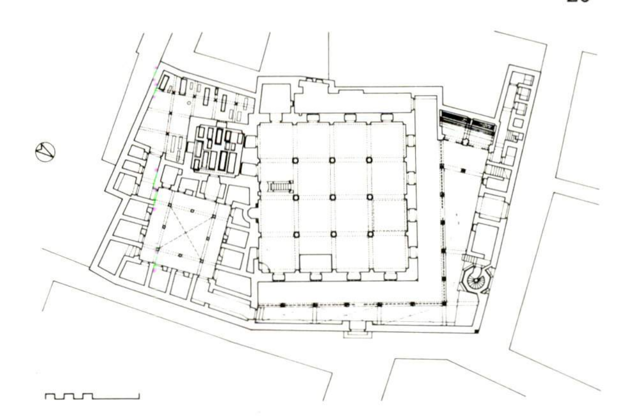










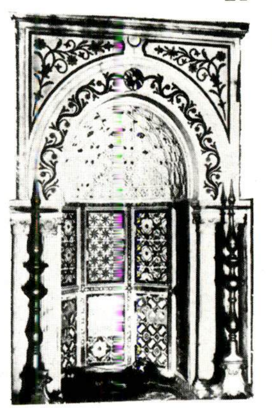


Similar to the al-Qarahmanli mosque, this mosque was built in the early 19th century. The interior shows the development of architectural decoration towards increasingly complex effect. Here stucco, tile panels, and inlaid marble are used to create sumptuous designs of foliage, calligraphy and geometry.

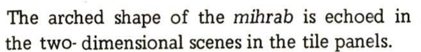
The minaret is octagonal, with two balconies and a tapering finial, in the Turkish manner.



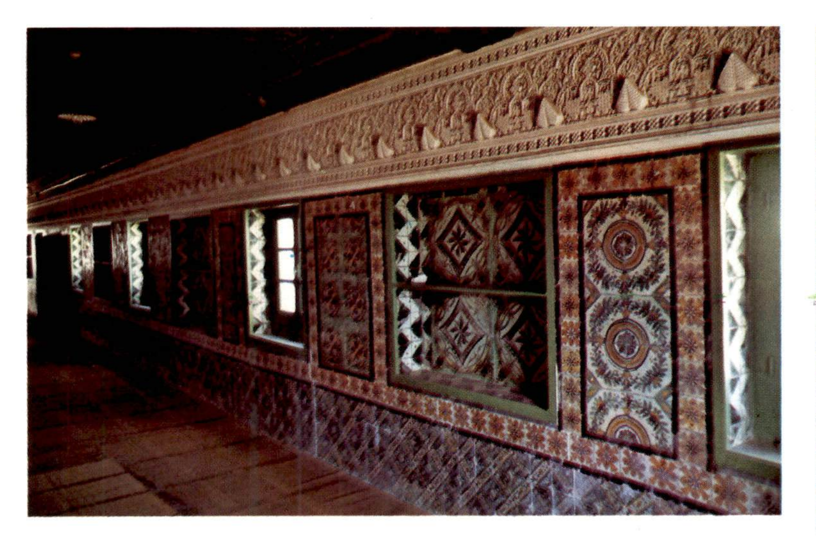




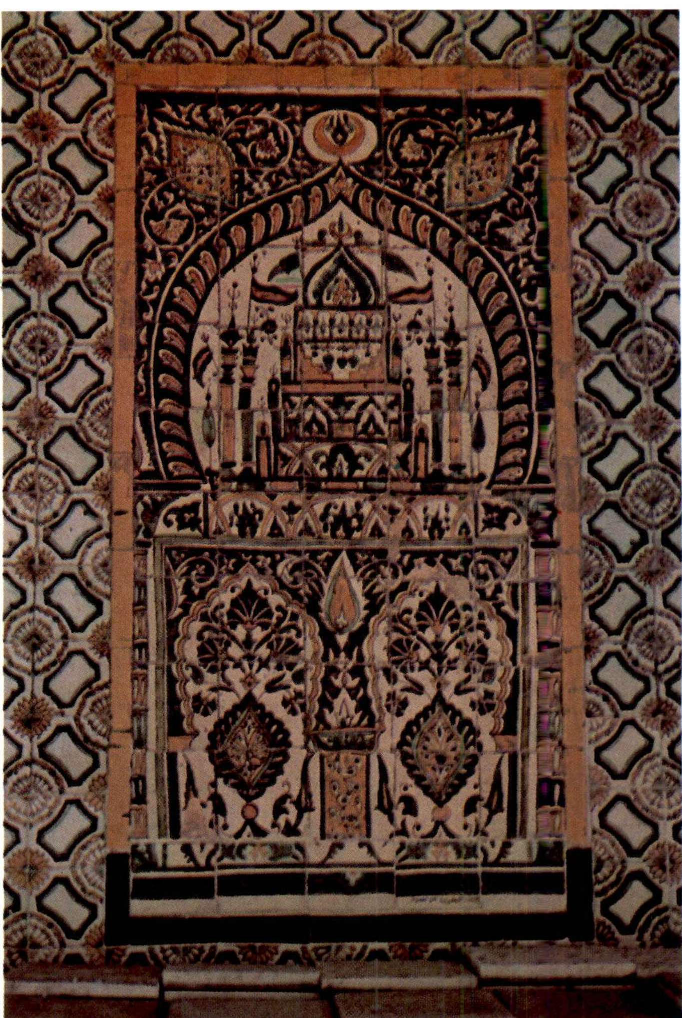
The upper and lower galleries of the sanctuary are richly decorated. The *mihrab* and the windows are of marble, inlaid with different coloured stones.



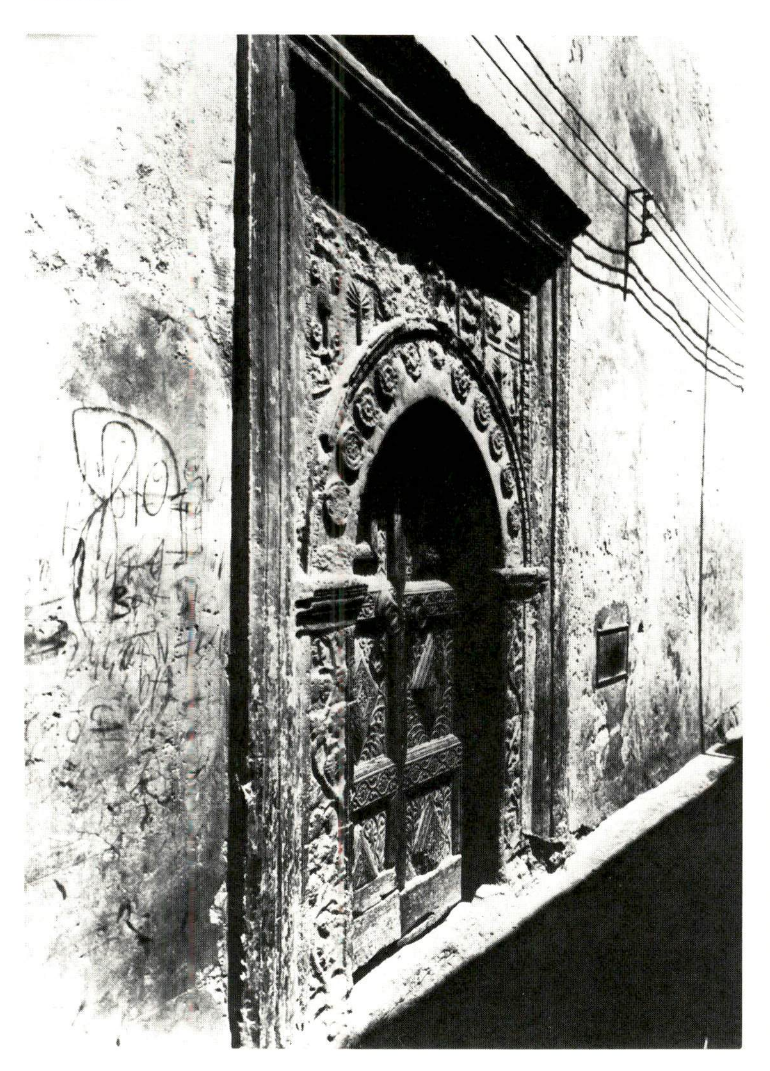
The arched shape of the *mihrab* is echoed in the two- dimensional scenes in the tile panels.







One of the most remarkable features of the architecture of old Tripoli is the carved stone doorways of its houses. Whereas the street facades of the houses are plainly whitewashed, the doorways are richly decorated in an amazing variety of designs – based on a repertoire of flower and foliage motifs. The carving is in shallow relief, and either covers the whole surface of the doorway – including the jambs, arch, or lintel and panel above – or is restricted to individual elements of decoration.





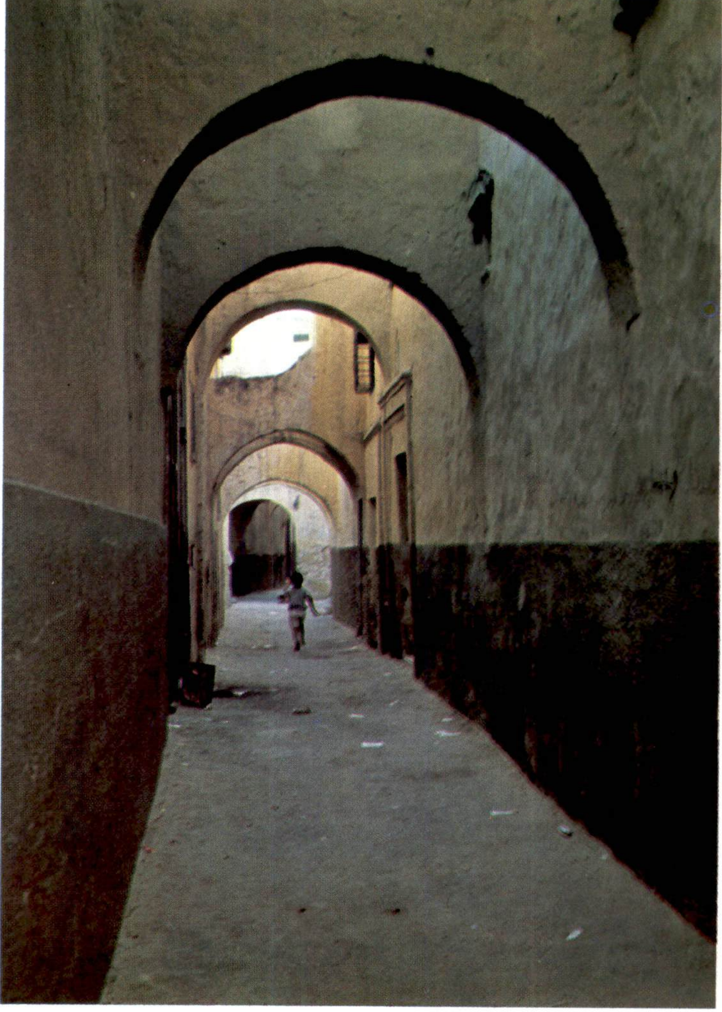


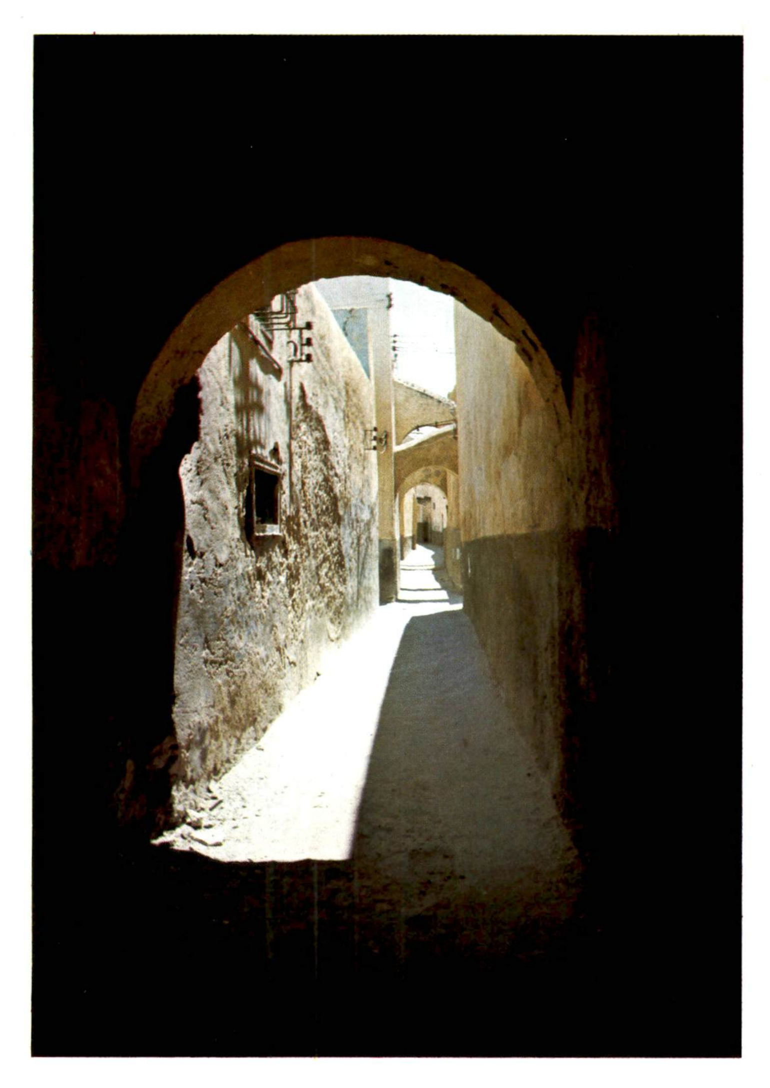




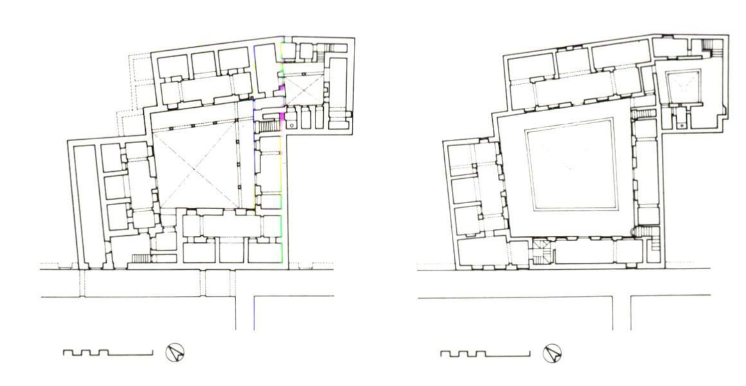
Narrow arcaded streets characterise the old city, providing access to the mosques, houses and funduqs. The plan facades are only broken by richly decorated doorways. The arches across the streets filter the sunlight and buttress the walls.





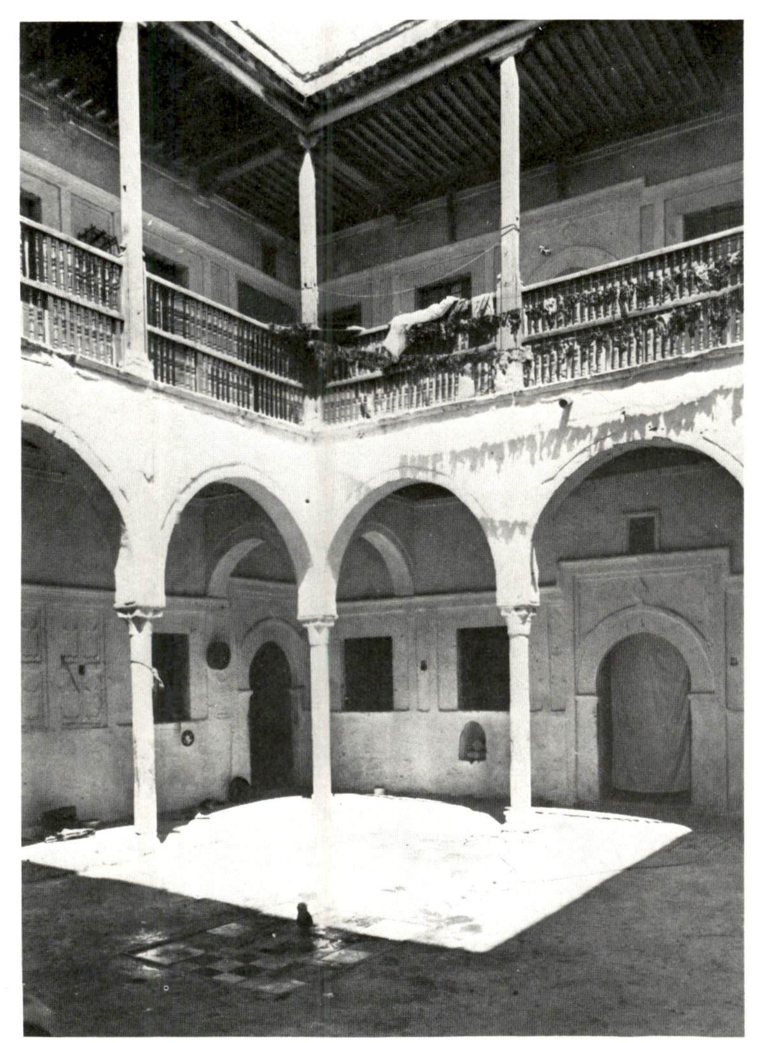






The courtyards of the houses are mostly two-storeyed, with wooden posts, balconies, and beams.

Walls are decorated with blind arcading in stucco, as well as tile panels, similar to those found in the mosques.

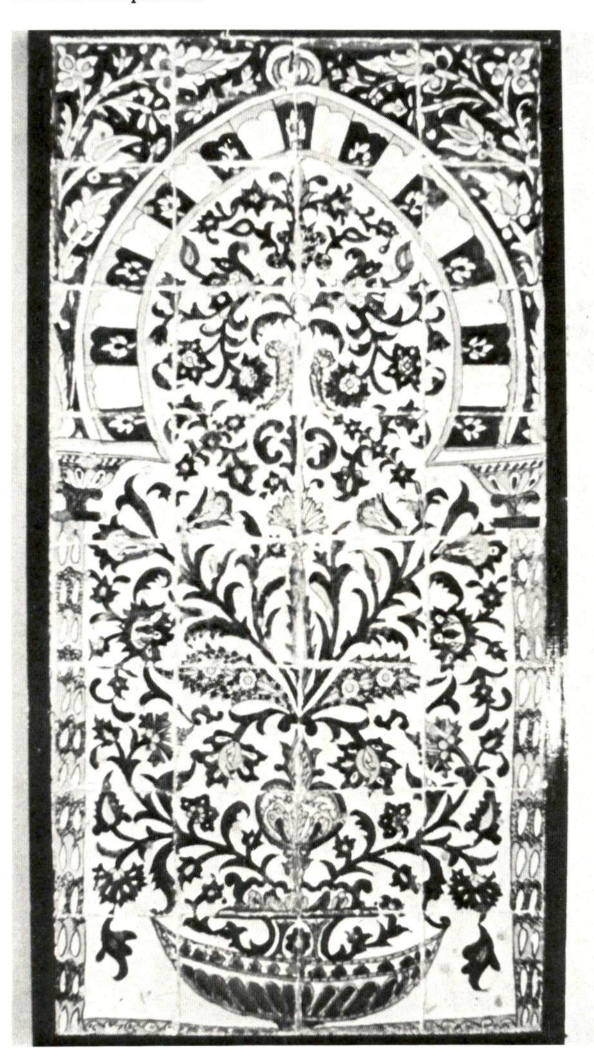


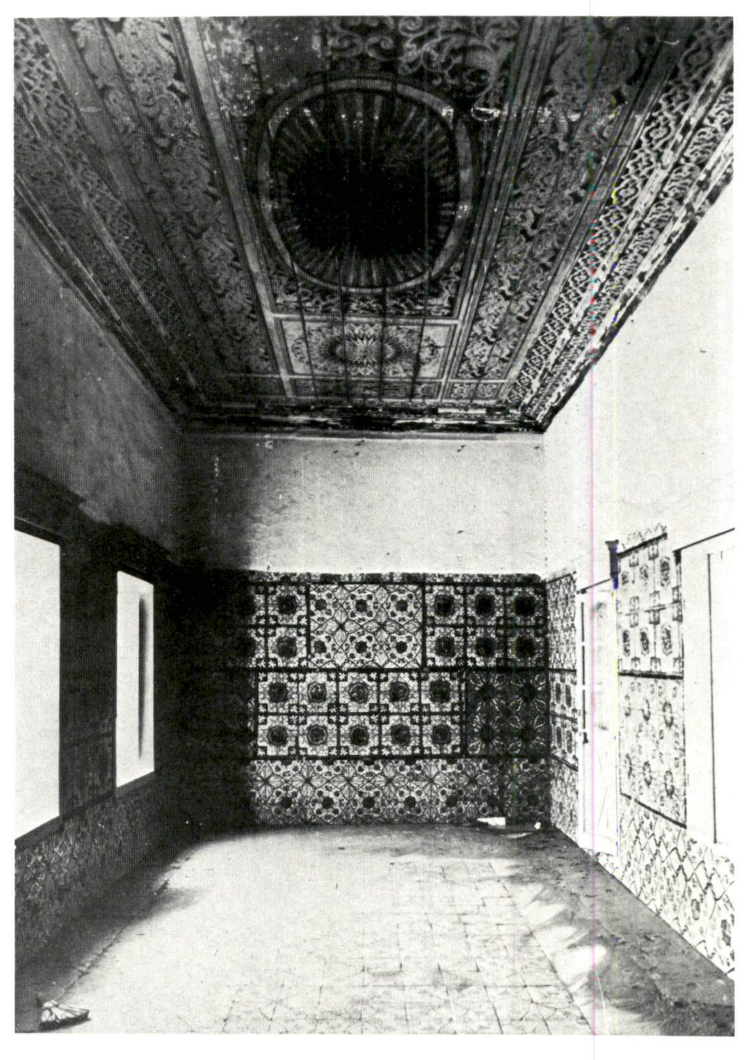


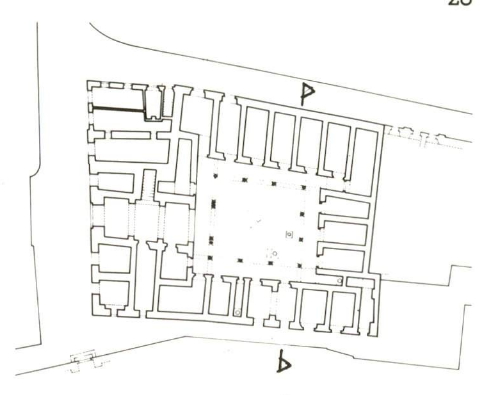


Houses of the wealthy were adorned with coloured tiles, some of which have inscriptions giving the date. These two panels come from the same house, and the date is given as 1849.

The timber ceilings of the rooms are sometimes painted with intricate patterns.



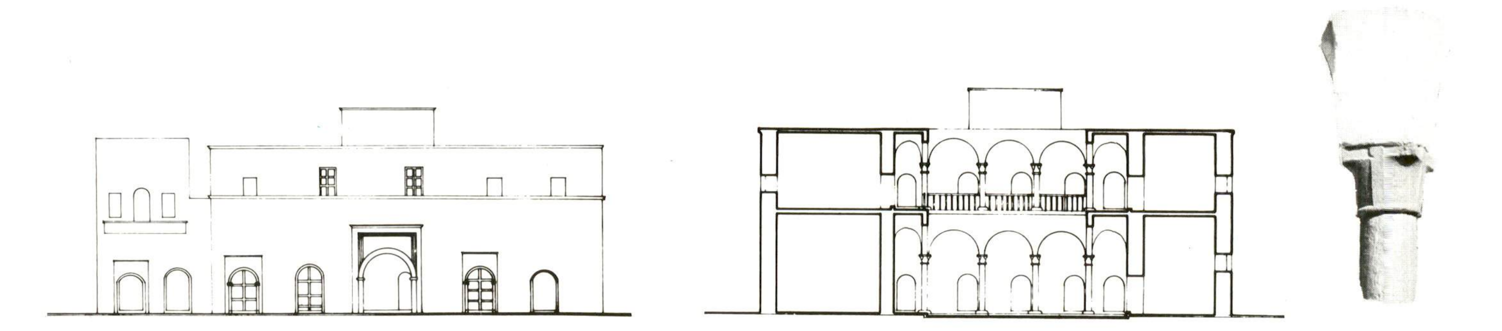




The *funduqs* were an important aspect of the commercial life of the city. Often associated with the *suqs*, they functioned as hotels for merchants, as well as storehouses and workshops. Generally of two storeys, the rooms are arranged around a courtyard, sometimes with a fountain.





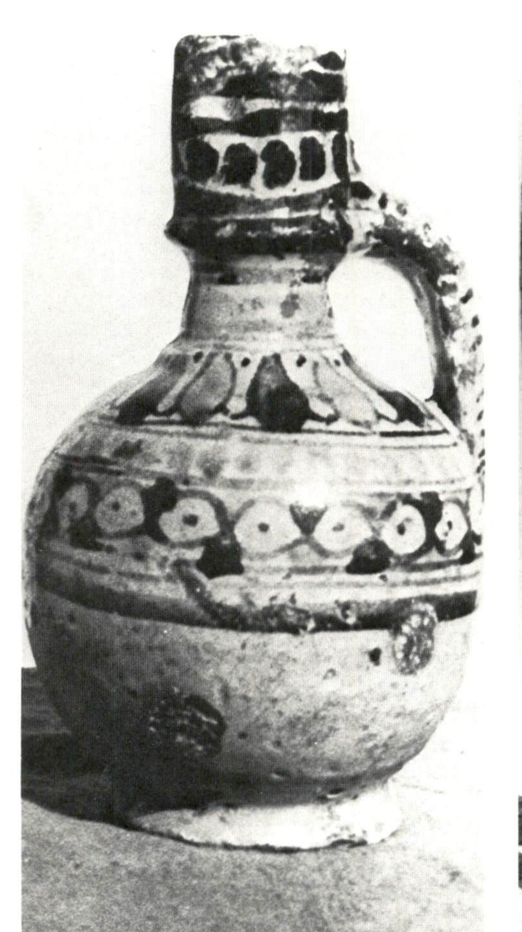


Some of the *suqs* in Tripoli are roofed, that of al-Raba[c] employs cross vaults of brick. The *suqs* are organised according to product and consist of rows of stalls. There are also open-air *suqs*, covered with awnings or sometimes with vines.

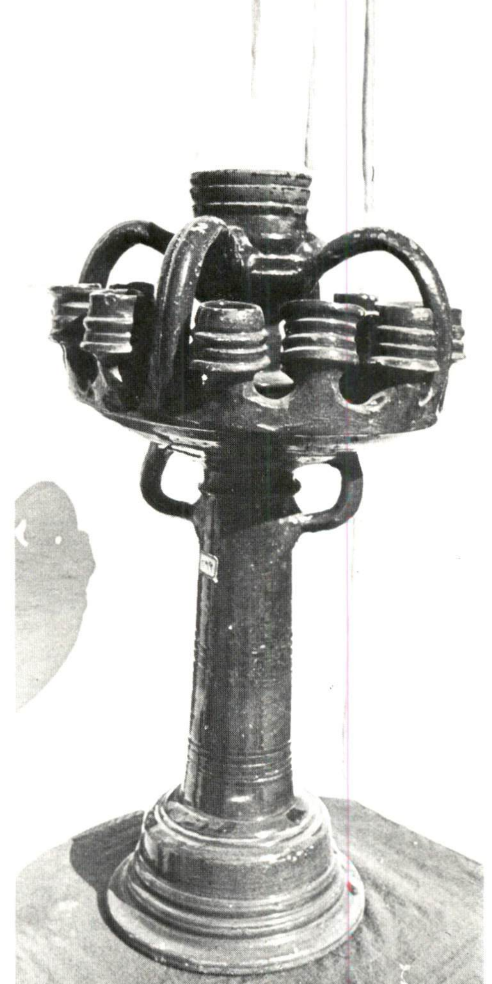


The shallow moulded earthenware dish with underglaze painted design, probably belongs to the Qarahmanli period. It is typical of the luxury objects associated with wealthy households.

Typical of products once sold in the *suqs* of Tripoli are these pottery items – jug, lamp, and candlestick. The dating of these objects is difficult, because of the continuity of the artistic tradition which produced them.







Libya boasts a rich vernacular architecture, including a number of major monuments such as the mosques and *madrasas* in Tripoli, and the archaeological remains of the various Islamic cities largely destroyed by the Hilalian invasion of 1050. This richness is seen both in the city architecture, best exemplified by Tripoli – with the development of the courtyard house theme and all its variations, and also in a number of houses and constructions scattered throughout different parts of the country.

Libya's vernacular architecture may be divided according to the principal geographical areas of the country – the coastal strip, the mountainous Jabal Nafusa, and the numerous oases stretching southwards to the Sahara. Outside Tripoli much of the vernacular coastal architecture has now disappeared with the development of this part of the country, not only in modern times, but also over the last few centuries. The *bir*, a well with steps up both sides, is typical of this area. Whilst dressed stonework is used in the coastal urban architecture and some ancient structures in the Jabal, the basic vernacular building materials are either rubble and mortar or sun-dried mud brick. Timber is employed for doorways as well as in floor and roof construction. Plaster forms an important part of architectural decoration, and is sometimes pierced to create windows. Plans of buildings are rarely consistent, but the repetition of such decorative devices as triangular perforations is a unifying feature.

One region of Libya which has developed a distinct vernacular architecture owing to its geographical isolation, as much as to any other single factor, is the area of the Jabal Nafusa – a range of hills rising steeply from the Jafara plain south of Tripoli. Many of the buildings of the Jabal are partially excavated into the ground, presenting only a low profile from the exterior. In the area of Tmizda for example, a troglodite community is still in existence, using their underground houses in the summer. The mosque there is completely underground, and is entered by a descending excavated ramp. There are also many isolated mosques which employ Roman or Byzantine carved stones in their construction, these presumably taken from the isolated ancient farmhouses and villas.

During the internicine wars which characterised the 11th and 12th century history in the Jabal, many of the cities were destroyed, and their remains now form some of the most interesting features of the area. These ruined cities continued to be occupied. They grow out of the ground itself, clustering along the spine of a hill or around its summit, such as at Forsatta. Here the houses are piled one on top of the other giving the impression of a cellular-like growth. The organic tendency of the architecture is epitomised in the extraordinary fortified granaries which are found at Kabao, Nalut, and Qasr al-Haj. In these granaries each family had its own separate store room. These are grouped together to form a defensive citadel in case of attack. Each of the storage chambers is a small barrel-vaulted chamber, with beams and platforms of timber. Holes cut in the walls permit access on hands and knees. The upper levels are reached by protruding beams. At Kabao and Qasr al-Haj, these granaries are arranged in a circle around an open central space, but at Nalut the granary is approximately rectangular and has a secondary grouping in the centre which rises higher than the outer ring. The granaries are among the most unusual vernacular constructions to be found anywhere in north Africa, and represent a building type created not by a single ruler, but by a community endeavour.

One of the most characteristic architectural features of the Jabal is the steeply pointed arch, more like a steep triangle. At Sharwas the dramatically sited castle makes use of these arches for the interior chambers, and at Nalut these arches are found in the mud-covered stone and brick architecture of the various old mosques. As three-dimensional structures, more like tripods than arches, they service the Nalut mosques as small minarets.

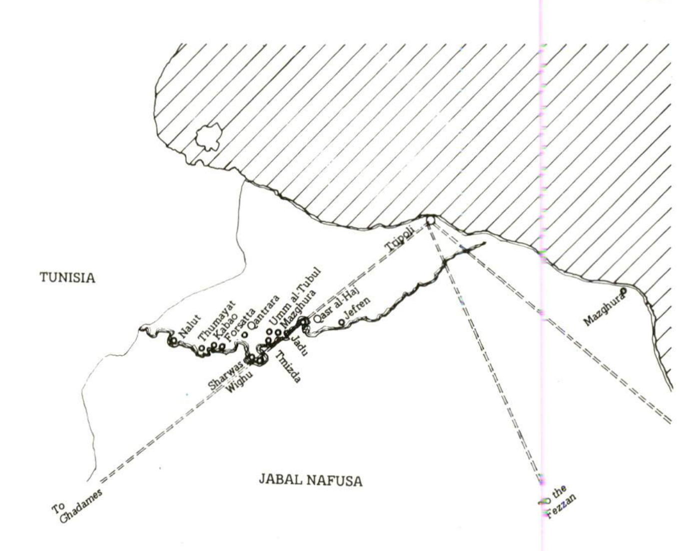
Also of interest is the decoration applied to the mud or plaster wall surfaces of the Jabal. In the interiors of the old mosques of Nalut various patterns are found, including open hand impressions. At al-Ubbarin calligraphy is combined with floral forms. However, at Thumayat the underground mosque displays a remarkable series of designs employing both painted and scratched techniques – transforming Arabic calligraphy into a series of abstract lines.

Other important areas where examples of vernacular architecture are found are the oases which link the coastal area of Tripolitania with the Sahara. One of the most interesting is the strange two-tier street structure of Ghadames. Here the upper level was the exclusive preserve of the women, allowing them to move freely about the town without being seen by the men, who circulated at ground level. The houses in this oasis also have their corners extended to form step-like projections, and whereas the exteriors are plainly whitewashed, their interiors are brightly decorated and hung with coloured baskets. The palm trunk door from Ghadames displays a fascination with geometric patterns of simple design. Walls with triangular perforations are also a feature of this area, and are also found throughout the Fezzan in a number of applications in the mosques and holy men's tombs.

At Ujlah the old mosque demonstrates that unusual vernacular forms were once incorporated into monumental architecture. Here a series of beehive domical forms surmounts an irregularly laid out sanctuary. At Sukna, a desert town on the main caravan route to the Fezzan, great use is made of colonnaded and roofed streets. Here also are found the painted doors showing both vernacular and urban influences. The city retains its old surrounding wall.

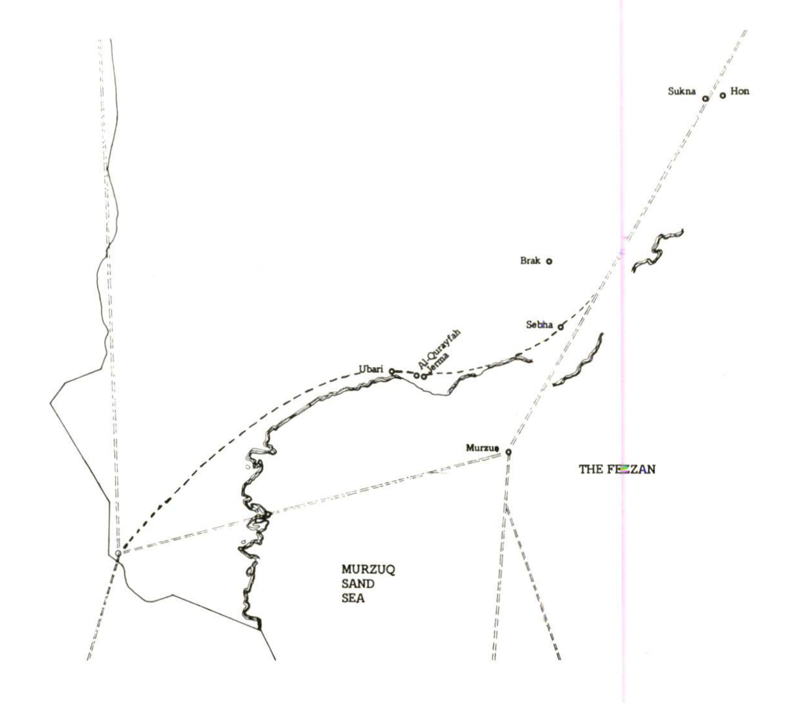
In southern Libya to the north and south of the mountain escarpments of the Fezzan there are settled oases. These lie along the old trade route between Sebha and Ghat, and in the area of Murzuk to the south. The building methods seen in Sukna and Hon in central Libya are continued here – low structures of sun-dried mud brick roofed by strata of palm trunks, palm fronds, stamped earth and mud plaster. The mosques of the Fezzan form an interesting and beautiful group – simple whitewashed structures with a low minaret entered from an external staircase. The characteristic ornamental motif of these buildings is the triangular "perforation" which is seen on minarets, above gateways and on the corners of the buildings. The horn above the doorways of the houses in Sebha are a noticeable characteristic, presumably functioning as a protective device.

Antony Hutt
Guy Petherbridge



Map of Tripolitania. The most interesting vernacular architecture of this area is concentrated in the villages along the northern face of the Jabal Nafusa and the oasis of Ghadames.

Map of the Fezzan (Southern Libya), showing trade routes linking the oases of this region with the Mediterranean coast and the West African savannah.



This flat coastal region is crowded with fields and palm groves. These are defined by earth walls planted with prickly pear, which helps to consolidate them and forms an impenetrable hedge. Within these groves are the wells from which, by means of the *bir* wellhead construction, water is drawn by animal labour. In coastal Tripolitania these are solid monumental structures, in contrast to the more flexible structures in the Fezzan, where the stresses are taken by wood and rope. The buttresses become a decorative stepped element, and the tops of the well are crowned by horn or toothed forms. The dwellings in this area – simple one-storeyed rectangular buildings – also carry a horn form at each corner.



Situated inland from the Tripolitanian coast below the escarpment of the Jabal Nafusa, is the stony Jafarah plain. Fortified watch towers have been constructed at strategic points.



One of the abandoned towns of the Jabal Nafusa, Forsatta's houses are grouped around a central fortified acropolis, overlooking a valley which still exhibits traces of earlier fertility. The acropolis of Forsatta is distinct from the fortified granaries of Kabao and Nalut in that it was a permanently inhabited structure.



This deserted town was once one of the caravan centres of the Jabal Nafusa, and was associated with the learned Abu Mahdi al-Wighawi. Various buildings in Wighu appear to date from the late 11th century and are constructed of dressed stone masonry. Often buildings consist of a series of isolated single-roomed habitations, each of which served as a single family house. There is evidence for the existence of a second floor within these rooms, supported on wooden beams.

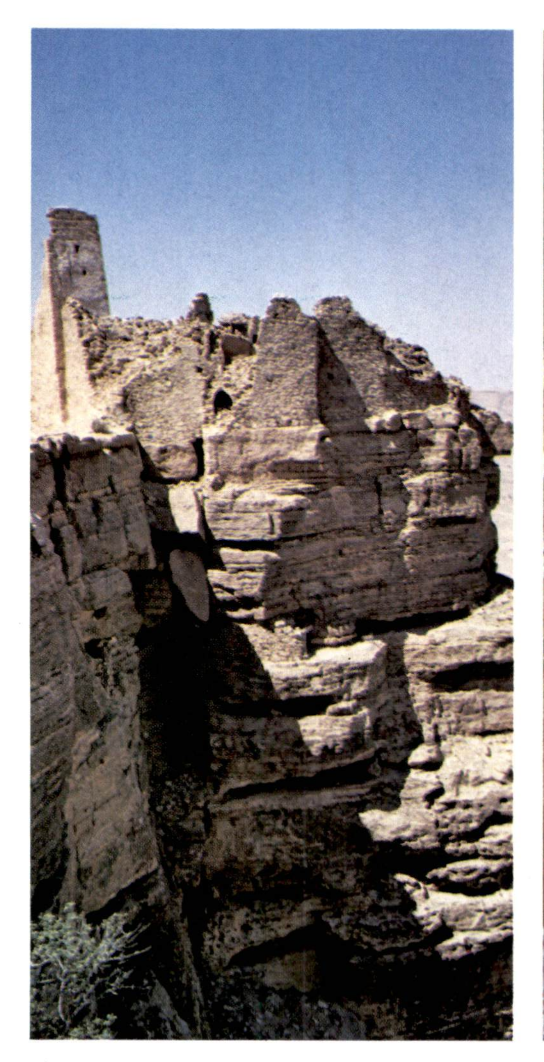


Once the site of a powerful city, Sharwas suffered considerably during the 11th century through a prolonged war with Wighu. Nevertheless, urban life continued in Sharwas until the 16th century. The city is built on a plateau overlooked by fortified hills on three sides. On the fourth side the ground drops sharply to the Tripolitanian plain The houses are constructed of rubble filling between upright stone slabs. These slabs were also employed for doorways.

The interior of the castle is now almost completely ruined, but traces of the unusual pointed arch are still found in some rooms.



The castle (Qasr al-Tira) is built on a spur of the Jabal, and its defensive position was further strengthened by a deep channel spanned by a drawbridge. The castle played an important part during the attack on Sharwas in the 12th century.



The mosque at Sharwas is still used by visitors, and displays typical Jabal structural characteristics.



The mosque at Umm al-Tubul, like others in the Jabal area, contains reused Roman structural and decorative fragments.



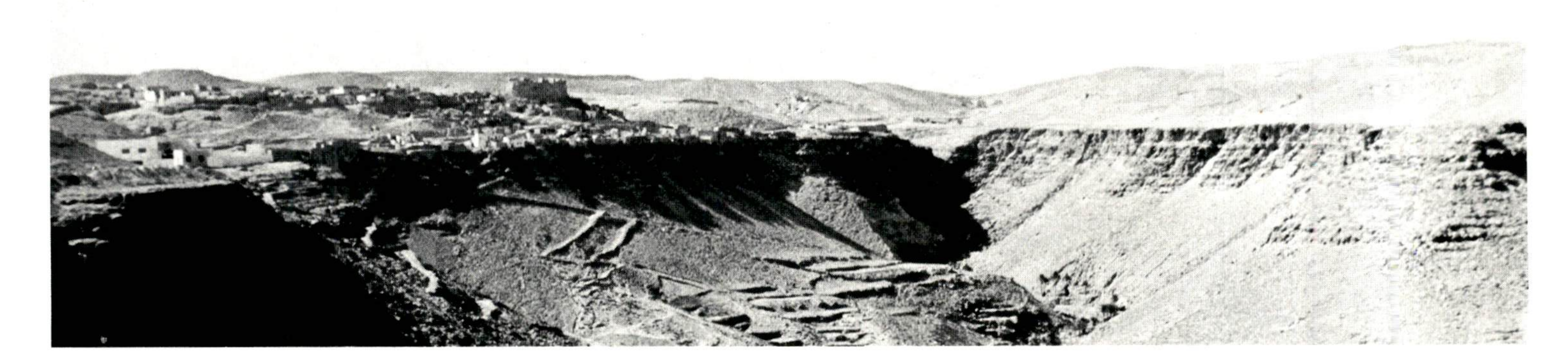
One of the most interesting structural phenomena of the Jabal Nafusa is the fortified communal storehouse. This is characteristically formed by a ring or rectangle of layers of superimposed barrel vaults, which open inwards and which have a uniform external wall broken only by small ventilation holes and a single entrance. The internal space provided a protected area for the villagers and their produce (each family having a separate barrel vaulted storeroom) during periods of siege, and also a market place in times of peace.

The communal granary of the village of Qasr al-Haj in the Jafarah plain is a circular structure.

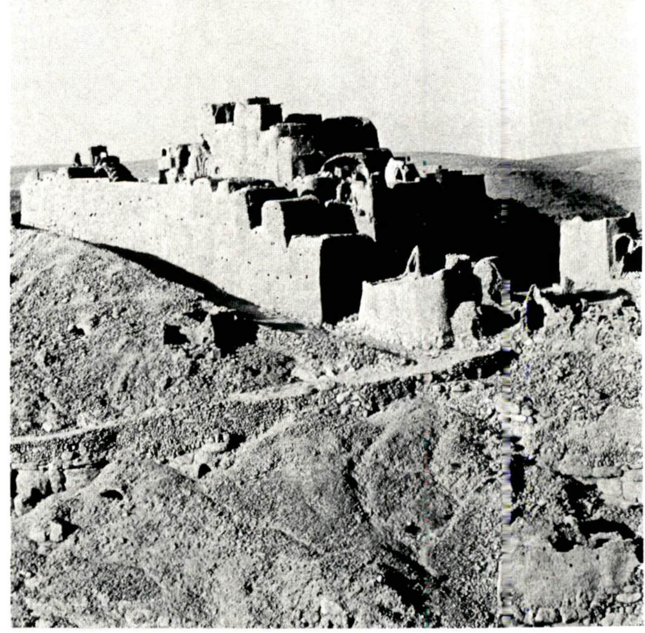


Kabao occupies a strong position at the head of one of the valleys of the Jabal Nafusa.

Whilst the granary of Kabao is roughly circular in plan, with the centre left open, the granary at Nalut is approximately rectangular and has a secondary grouping in the centre which rises higher than the outer ring. The narrow single entrance passage still contains the great copper drum which was beaten to announce the approach of an enemy, and was the signal for the population to flee.





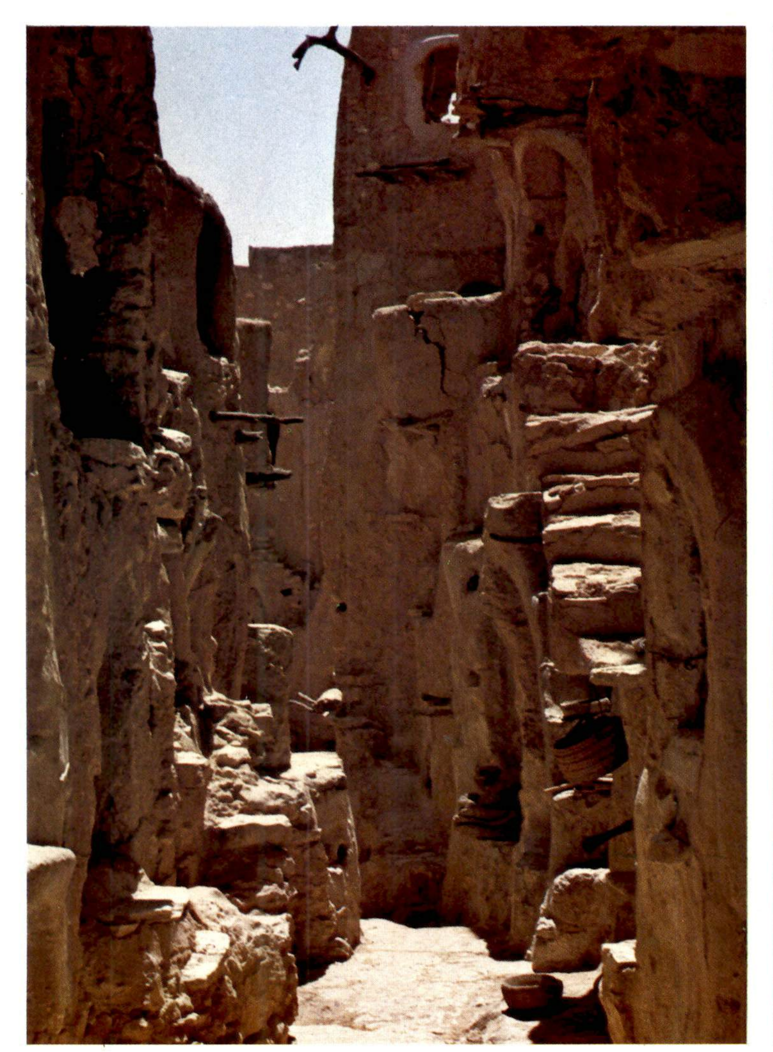


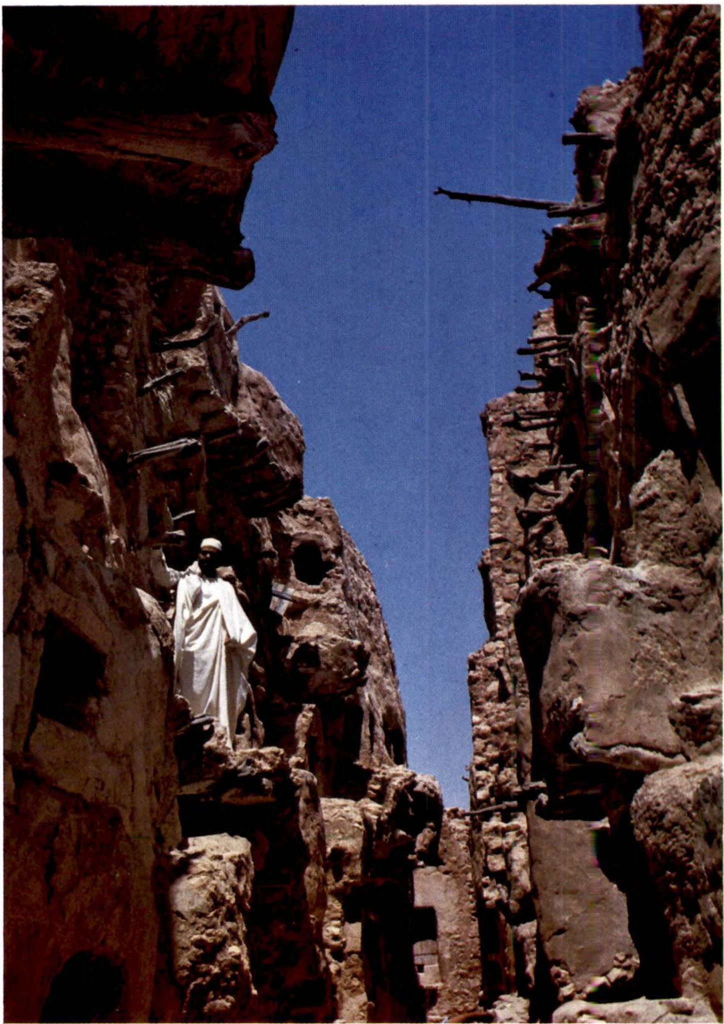
Interior of the *Qasr* at Kabao.

Each of the store chamber units has its own entrance balcony. The upper levels are reached by means of these balconies, and by protruding beams. This building is a remarkable example of organic cellular architecture.



The granary at Nalut has no open interior space. Its vaulted chambers are constructed in rows with very narrow alleys between them. Access is provided by beams and by projecting stone steps.





These tombs of *marabouts* in Libya seem to follow no consistent plan or structure, although they usually consist of a single chamber, but follow local variations of style or building methods. In their simplest form they may be very small domed structures at the head of a grave, in which offerings are placed; or they may take a very elaborate vernacular form, as in the *marabout's* tomb at Ubari.

This basic structure – a square chamber supporting a dome with horn projections at the corners – is frequently used as a tomb building throughout North Africa.

Tomb in eastern Tripolitania, near Misurata.

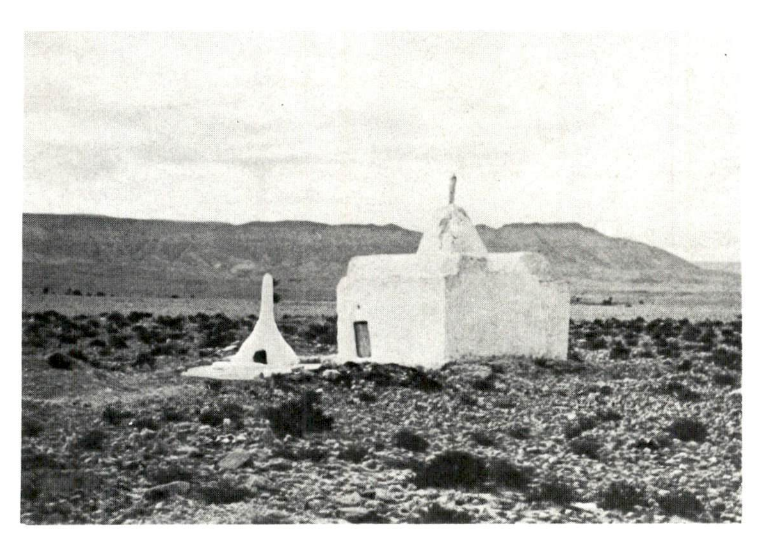


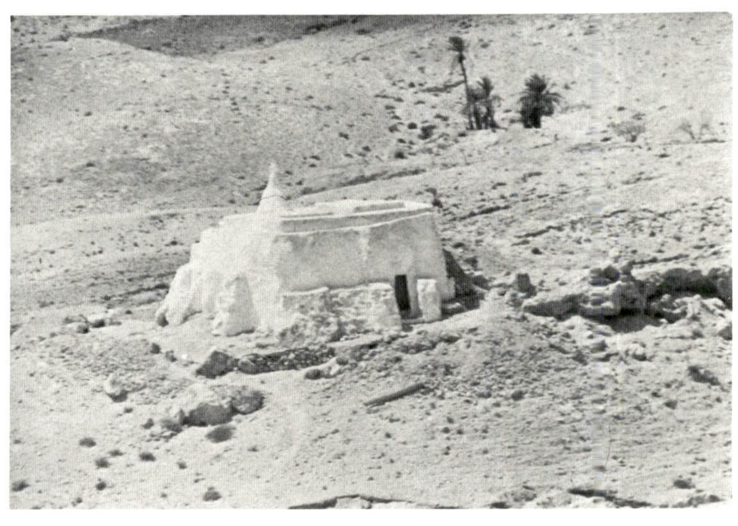
Marabout's tomb

Mosque at Qantrara

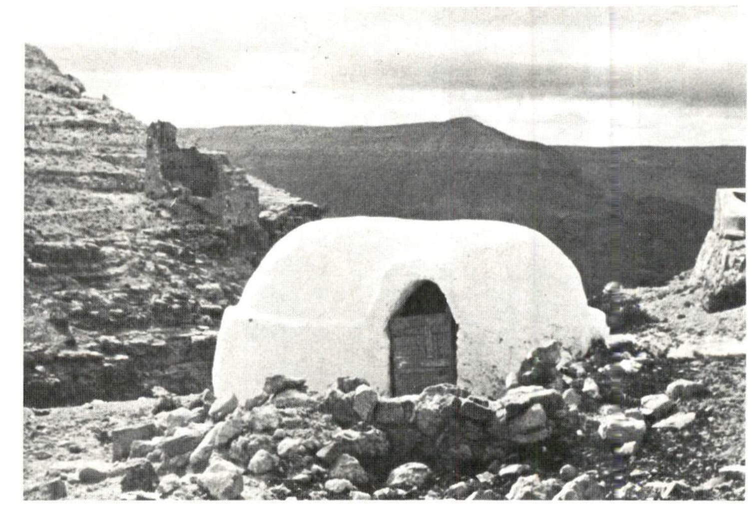
Marabout's tomb

Marabout's tombs in Jafarah.



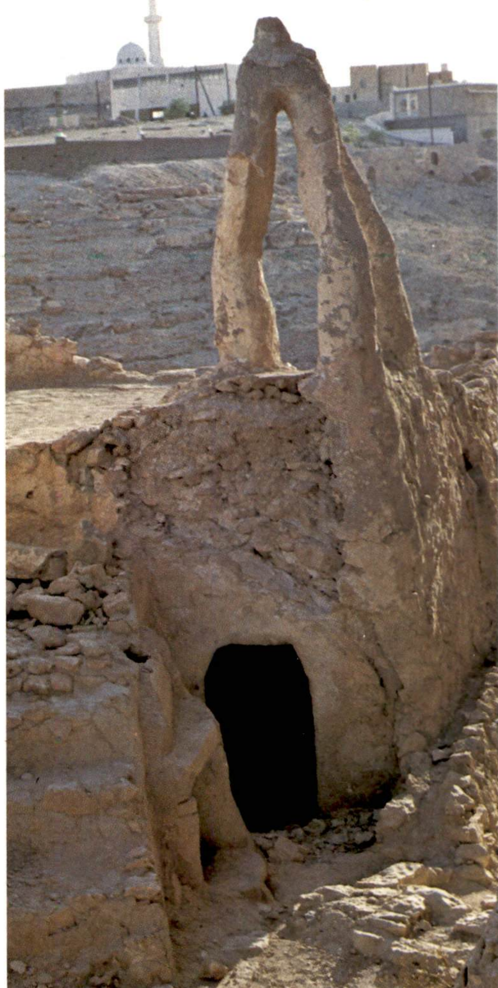


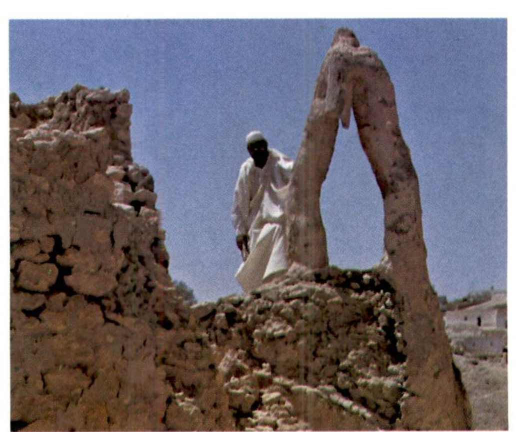


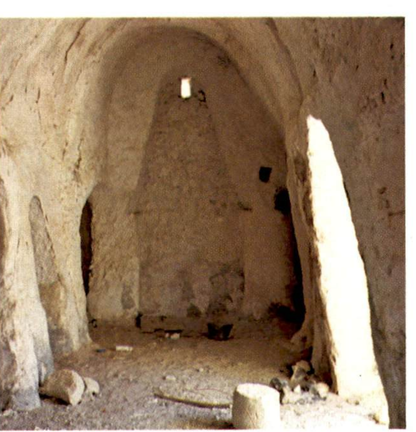


One of the mosques of Nalut is organised with a sanctuary below ground and a flat roof. Associated with it is an outdoor *mihrab*, permitting prayers to be held in the open. The prayer hall is constructed of a series of barrel-vaulted aisles, supported by arches. These mosques have a unique form of minaret, consisting of three uprights forming a tripod. The building's internal arches reflect the form of the steep arch of the tripod – as does the outdoor *mihrab*. The interior is covered with mud plaster onto which patterns have been made, including open-hand impressions.







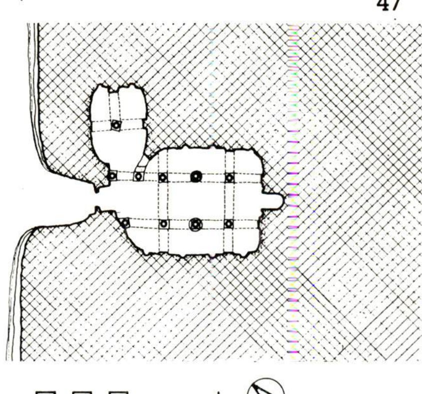


Throughout the Jabal are a number of isolated mosques, many of which are of a considerable age, and are characterised by being partially built above ground and partially excavated into the ground to present a very low profile.

The underground mosque of Abu Zakariya, in the region of Tmizda, is named after a celebrated 9th century savant. It was once part of a complex of such buildings used by a troglodite community. The mosque is entered by a descending excavated ramp. Side rooms open off from the underground sanctuary.

The underground mosque of Thumayat dates from the 12th century. It is one of the best preserved of all mosques of the Jabal and its interior is covered with intricate graphic decoration.

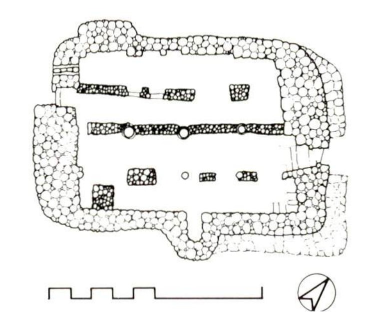
Plan of the mosque of Thumayat





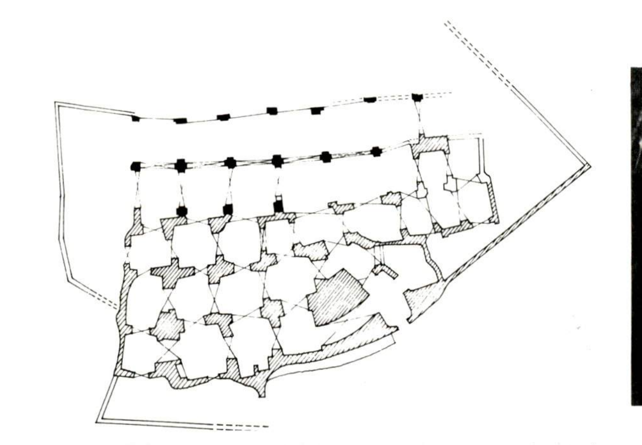


The mosque of al-Baruni is one of the most important mosques in the Jabal. It has a very beautiful Kufic inscription and very fine decoration. It is believed that this mosque dates from the 9th century AD. The mosque lies within the remains of a once-flourishing settlement.





Inscribed stone medallions flank the *mihrab* within the mosque.



The mosque al-Jami[c] al-[c]Atiq at Ujlah is an unusual structure. It is roofed by a series of beehive domes, constructed of rough stones and mud mortar, and covered with a mud plaster.

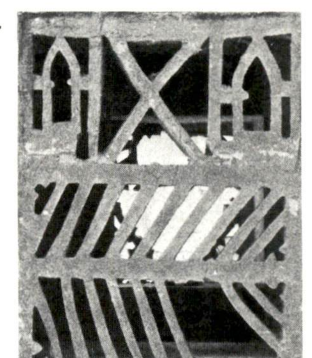
Ghadames is an oasis in the south-west of Tripolitania in the Hammadah al-Hamra near the borders with Tunisia and Algeria. It was a great commercial centre, owing to its position on one of the major trade routes. There are remains of a very early mosque whose foundation is attributed to one of the companions of the Prophet. Ghadames is notable for its two-tier street structure, the upper level being used exclusively by women who were thus able to move freely within the city. Buildings are constructed of mud brick, plastered and whitewashed, and are particularly distinguished by high step-like projections at each corner of the roof.



The elaborate external decoration of the houses in Ghadames is reflected in the painted palm tree doors and in the interiors, crowded with decorative assemblages of domestic utensils and furniture.

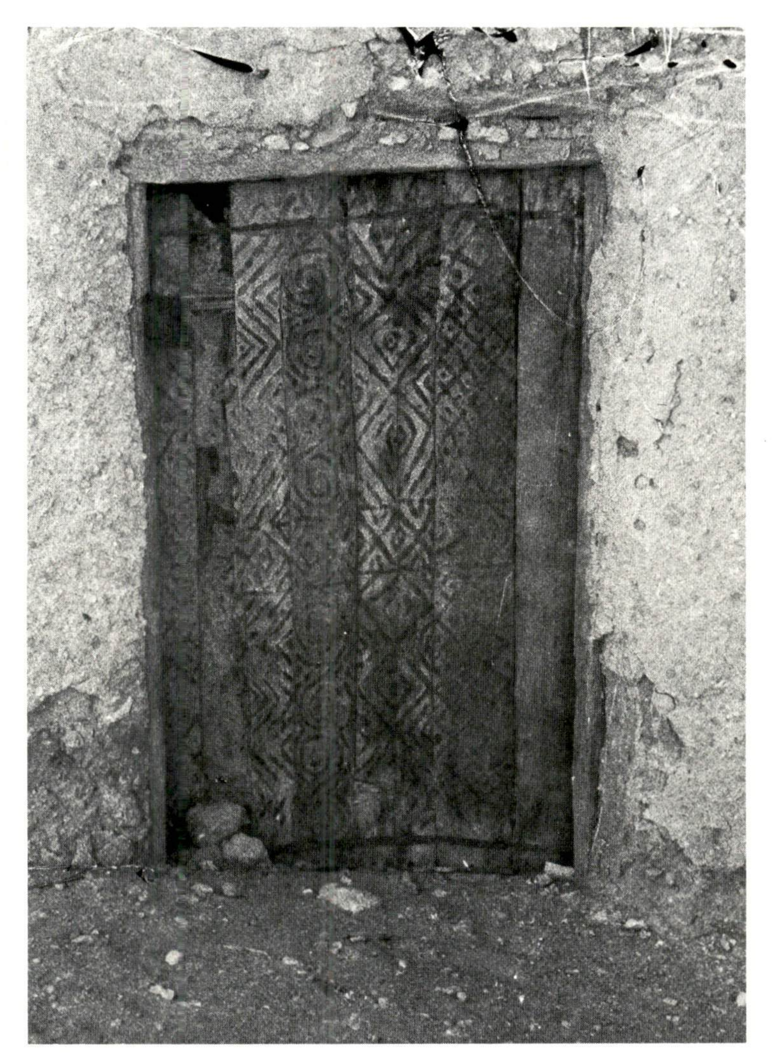


SUKNA: DOORS AND WINDOW



Geometric plaster window lattice at Hon.

The traditional doors in this town, as in other parts of the Libyan Sahara, are constructed of vertical palm planks attached to horizontal cross-bars and then decorated. The doorway on the left is painted with typical indigenous motifs, whereas the doorway on the right shows painting derived from some external source, perhaps mosque painted tile decoration.





The streets and passages of Sukna are often spanned at regular intervals by palm trunks or brick arches. This feature gives some shade to the street, (a covering can be placed across it in hot weather), as well as helping buildings on either side of the street to buttress one another. Similar streets are seen in other Saharan towns, e.g. the oasis of Kharga.



This Sukna mosque has an unusual minaret.

Here and in the Fezzan, mosques and tombs are usually the only buildings which are whitewashed.



Except for the mountainous regions, the Fezzan is not totally barren, as is the desert to the north. Oases are connected by the Sebha-Ghat road which, together with the road south to Murzuk, form important ancient trade routes across the Sahara. These oases are planted with palm groves and small irrigated patches, defined by low mud walls and watered from wells. Fields and domestic compounds are fenced by palm fronds stuck in the ground and connected by plaited strips near the top. These act as wind and sand barriers. The houses are of sun-dried mud brick (sometimes flat stones are used in parts of the construction), single-storeyed, and plastered with mud. The roofs are flat, supported by palm trunks across which are laid palm fronds, then stamped earth, and then mud plaster.

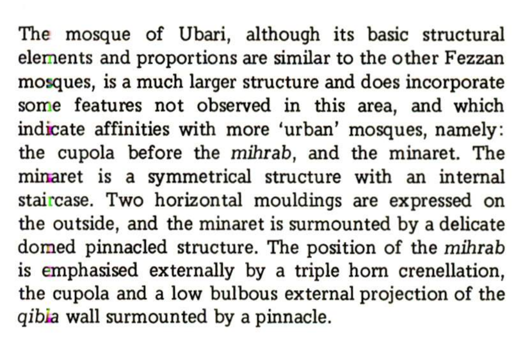
The houses are sparsely decorated, the sole ornamental elements being the occasional use of whitewash – perhaps to define a window or doorway; a green or blue painted door; decorative and symbolic graffiti above a lintel; or a triangular motif formed by leaning two bricks or flat stones on top of another horizontal one.

This module can form a triangular opening or window in a wall; if placed above a roof line it can give a symbolic horn form; in multiples it can form a tooth frieze or rosette.

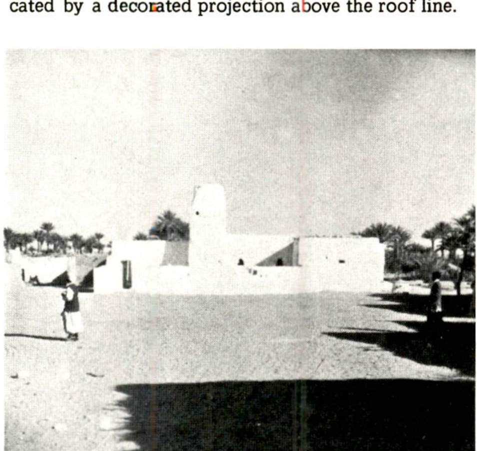


THE FEZZAN: MOSQUES

The mosques in this region follow the usual mosque organisation of enclosed prayer hall, *mihrab*, interior courtyard, and minaret. They are built of the same materials and construction methods as the local domestic architecture. They are relatively low structures, with the single minaret usually less than twice the height of the prayer hall and courtyard wall. The minaret is approached by a staircase from the exterior courtyard, not from within the prayer hall. This staircase minaret is a dominant feature of Fezzan mosque architecture. The minaret contains one or more triangular openings at each of its sides, and some decoration, usually a frieze, at its summit – formed from the structural triangulation motif. The prayer hall is supported by simple arches. The *mihrab* is expressed externally and its position indicated by a decorated projection above the roof line.



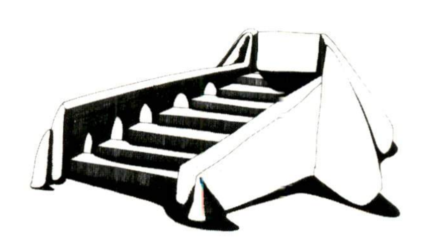
The mosque of Ubari, although its basic structural elements and proportions are similar to the other Fezzan mosques, is a much larger structure and does incorporate some features not observed in this area, and which indicate affinities with more 'urban' mosques, namely: the cupola before the *mihrab*, and the minaret. The minaret is a symmetrical structure with an internal staircase. Two horizontal mouldings are expressed on the outside, and the minaret is surmounted by a delicate domed pinnacled structure. The position of the *mihrab* is emphasised externally by a triple horn crenellation, the cupola and a low bulbous external projection of the *qibla* wall surmounted by a pinnacle.



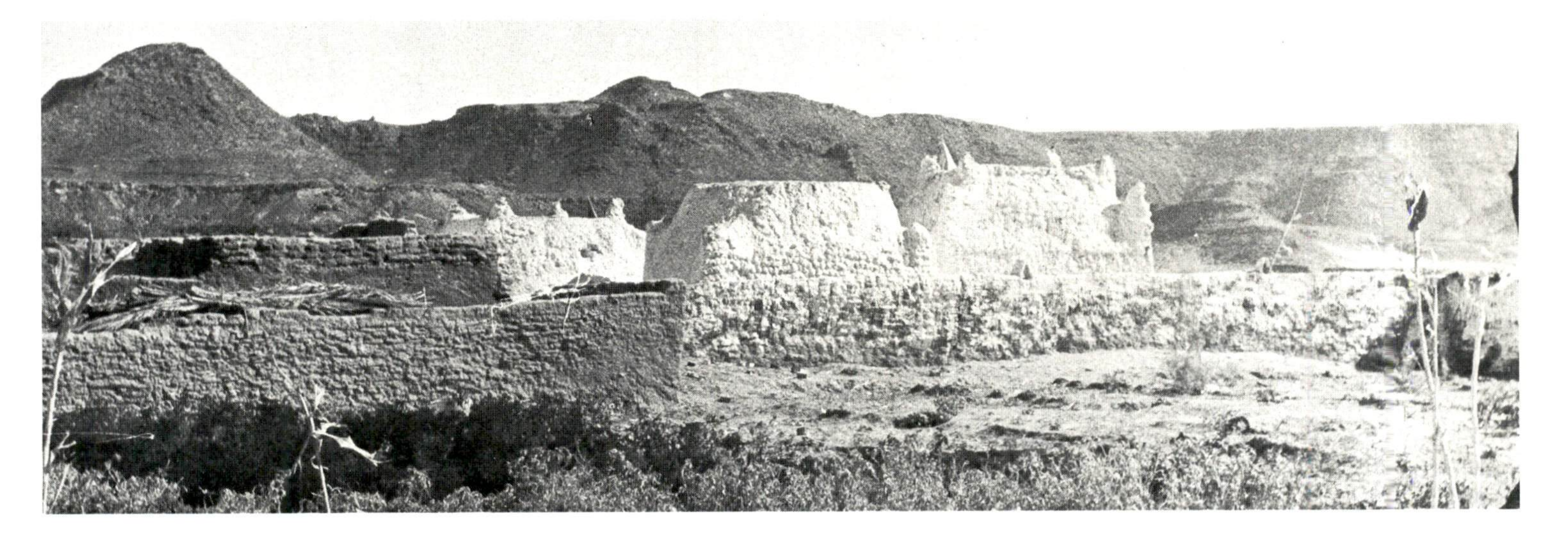


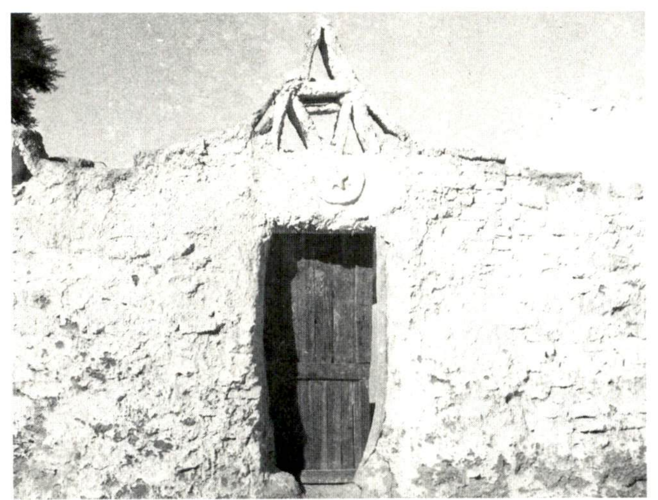
In this area, these tombs lie amongst poorer graves, which are indicated simply by a mound of sand, at the head and foot of which are placed upright stones (rudimentary steles). A woman's grave is indicated by a third stone, which is placed at the centre of the mound. These simple graves are soon obliterated by the desert sandstorms. Tombs, or tomb complexes are often decorated by the characteristic Fezzan triangular motif.

In certain instances these forms may be intended to ward off malevolent influences, as does the horn form above the decorated gateway in the old quarter of Sebha, the capital of the area.



A notable and unusual Fezzan religious structure is the outdoor *minbar*, a series of steps leading to a niche, constructed in mud brick, and whitewashed.







Marabouts' tombs in the Fezzan are generally square in plan, surmounted by crenellations and triangular projections.

This tomb near Qasr Khulayt shows this form in its simplest; whereas the tomb at Ubari is a particularly intricate example.



Tomb at Ubari.



Asked to name the most impressive ancient monuments in Libya, most of us would begin with the cities of the Graeco-Roman World, with Cyrene, Sabratha and Leptis Magna heading the list. A pre-historian would add the name Hava Fteah. Few would include a single Islamic monument earlier than the 18th century, the date of the Qarahmanli mosque at Tripoli. The reason for this is simple: Libya has no standing medieval monument even remotely comparable, say, with the Great Mosque at Qairawan or the buildings of Cairo. Indeed, at present, we know of only a handful of smaller monuments which have survived more or less intact from the first few centuries of Islam. This is not to say that medieval Libya was a cultural desert – clearly, it was not. Set astride three of the great caravan routes of North Africa, Libya flourished and, until the invasion of the Banu Hilal in 1051, the coastal strip supported thriving settlements. The main route across Africa, from Egypt to the Maghrib, traversed the coast, linking Barqa (modern al-Marj), Ajdabiyah, Medina Sultan and Tripoli. An important route from Chad and West Africa led northwards through the oases of Zawilah and Jufra to Medina Sultan. A third route brought goods from the Sudan to Kufra, Jalu and Ajdabiyah. Four "coastal" towns were of major importance: Barqa, then the administrative centre of the region we call Cyrenaica; Tripoli, the leading port; and the two crossroad towns, Ajdabiyah and Medina Sultan. In these and other settlements, medieval monuments are lacking not because they never existed, but because of centuries of erosion, neglect and at times deliberate destruction have taken a heavy toll. Fortunately the Government of Libya is well aware of the loss and today the Department of Antiquities does everything in its power to rescue what survives of the country's Islamic heritage. Given the rarity of standing monuments, the only means of acquiring new information about the material culture of the medieval period – library and museum work apart – is to excavate buried remains, and archaeology has already made significant strides towards a new appreciation of Libya in the early centuries of Islam

Several sites promise to yield exciting results (Tocra, for example, with its suspected Umayyad castle, Zawilah and possibly al-Marj), but two are in particular demand and have received special attention. The first is Medina Sultan, a point at which the trans-Saharan route from Chad joined the coast road from Egypt to the west. This is now a deserted site and the Department of Antiquities has excavated here with important results: readers of *Libya Antiqua* I (1964) and III-IV (1966-7) will find reports on the 10th century mosque and parts of the city wall. Recently a foreign expedition returned to Medina Sultan, and the site still has an anormous amount to tell us about the appearance, economy and social life of a medieval Libyan town.

The second site is Ajdabiyah, a settlement which grew up round sweet-water wells and became the crossroads for traffic between the Sudan and the coastal route. Unlike Medina Sultan, Ajdabiyah is a modern town. As it expands, new suburbs threaten to engulf the ancient site. Fortunately, the local authorities realise that the crisis exists. Excavations have already uncovered two important buildings, a mosque and a castle; plans for another campaign (a joint Libyan-British venture) are also well underway.

The mosque is a major find: a roughly rectangular building measuring 47 metres by 31. It has a courtyard surrounded on all four sides by a single arcade. The sanctuary, which was entered from an arcade, is four bays deep and nine bays wide, with a "T-shaped" plan: that is, with a broad axial "nave" in front of the mihrab and broad "transepts" immediately in front of the qibla wall. The minaret has a square base originally surmounted (as old photographs show), by an

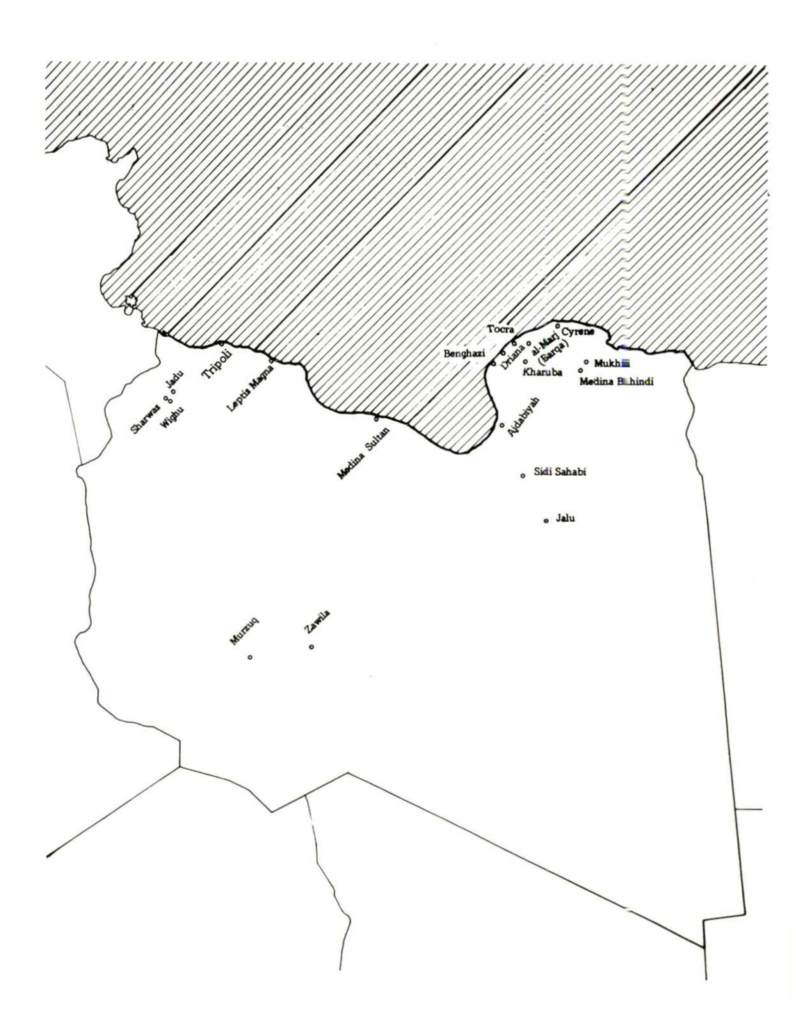
octagonal shaft – just as a medieval writer, al-Bakri described. A fragmentary inscription gives the date (3)10 = 922AD or (3)20 = 932AD and shows that the mosque was built by Abu'l Qasim, who later became the second Fatimid Caliph – again, just as al-Bakri reported. The mosque, therefore, is an early Fatimid building. It is, in fact, a milestone of the development of Fatimid architecture, mid-way between the earliest Fatimid mosque, which was built at Mahdiya in 912 and which it imitates, and the mosque of al-Azhar in Cairo, built in 970.

The *qasr* or castle, too, is a major monument: a rectangular building with round towers at the angles and square salients reinforcing the longer sides. A monumental entrance, which also copies the mosque at Mahdiya, led by way of a 'bent entrance' into a central court. On each side of the courtyard were long gallery-like rooms intended for bodyguards and other retainers. At the end of the court was a suite of rooms entered through a cross-hall – a version of the so-called "Hira plan" which is found in Iraq and was described by the 10th century writer Ma'sudi.

The new excavations are designed to discover and investigate some of the minor monuments of medieval Ajdabiyah. It is hoped, for example, to examine one or more town houses (at present we have no idea of the layout of the medieval house in Libya) and, given luck, to look at the *suq*.

Medieval Islam attracts scholars in a dozen or more disciplines from philosophy to the study of industry and trade. Archaeology is now a valuable source of evidence for most aspects of material culture, and in the next few years the Department of Antiquities is likely to provide us with considerable food for thought.

David Whitehouse

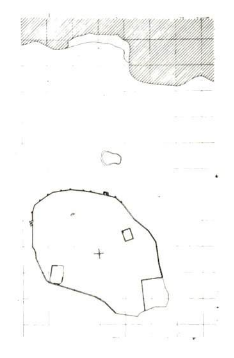


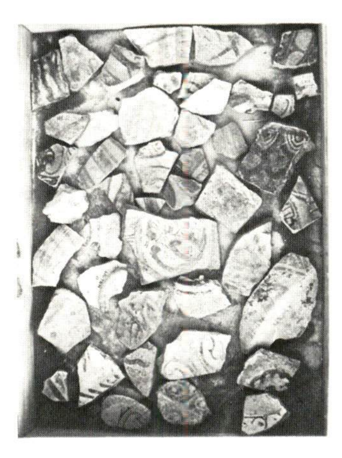
Situated at the point at which the trans-Saharan route from Chad joins the main coast road, Sultan's importance was further emphasised by the existence of the only sheltered anchorage in the Gulf of Sirte. The city was walled and had two internal defensive forts and a further fort situated between the city and the coast. The mosque dates from the early 10th century (Fatimid period), and the bays of the sanctuary run parallel to the *qibla* wall. The stucco fragments from the mosque are typical of the period, while the pottery fragments are consistent with examples from further west in Tripoli and Tunisia

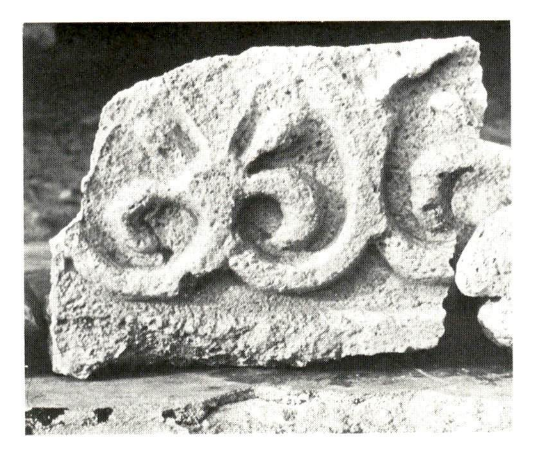
Remains of the mosque at Medina Sultan. The bays of the sanctuary run parellel to the *qibla* wall.

Stucco fragments from Medina Sultan.

The pottery fragments from Medina Sultan are consistent with examples found from sites further west in Tripoli and Tunisia.

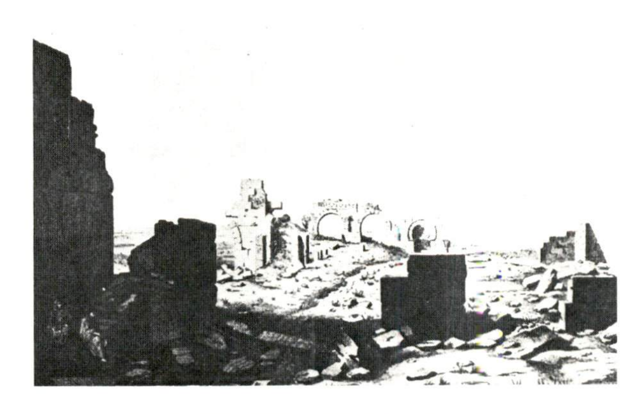




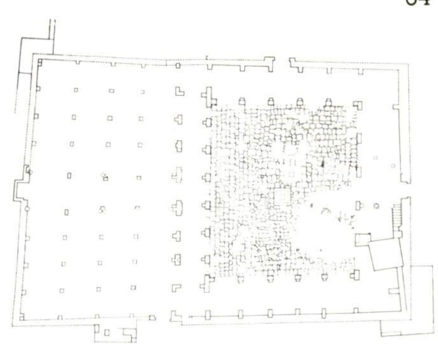




At the eastern end of the Gulf of Sirte, Ajdabiyah is positioned at the confluence of the trans-Saharan Sudanese route and the coastal road. The town was founded on this site, 18kms from the coast, because of the existence of sweet water wells. The minaret of the early 10th century Fatimid mosque is unusual in having an external stone staircase to the top of the solid square stone base, above which formerly rose an octagonal shaft with an internal staircase. Although now largely destroyed, the lower section including the base of the octagonal shaft is just visible to the right of the 19th century engraving by Pacho, which also shows the arches and the *mihrab* of the sanctuary which have now disappeared.



Unlike the mosque of Medina Sultan, the aisles in the Ajdabiyah mosque run perpendicular to the *qibla*. The courtyard is surrounded on all four sides by a single arcade, while the sanctuary facade is formed by a row of massive piers. These piers have semi-circular niches which have been confused with external *mihrabs*, but were probably for water jars. Such niches are found in Medina Sultan, Mahdiya in Tunisia and the later Fatimid mosques in Cairo, constituting, like the arcades on all four sides of the courtyard, a Fatimid hallmark. The stucco fragment from the mosque is typical early Fatimid workmanship.



Stucco fragments discovered in the mosque.

Semi-circular niche from sanctuary facade piers.







A number of inscriptions from Ajdabiyah are now in the museum at Cyrene. They are carved in relief on stone blocks, varying in height from 33 to 54cms, and in thickness from 6 to 18cms. One inscription (a) from the mosque records a *waqf* and is dated to 922-3 or 932AD. This is the earliest and stylistically simplest of the inscriptions found. Another (b) is dated 351AH/962AD and illustrates a more developed Kufic style with floriation of the upper terminals. The third (c), undated, has an even more developed floriation and is enclosed between guard-bands of the so-called Sasanian bead pattern, and is possibly later.


a


b

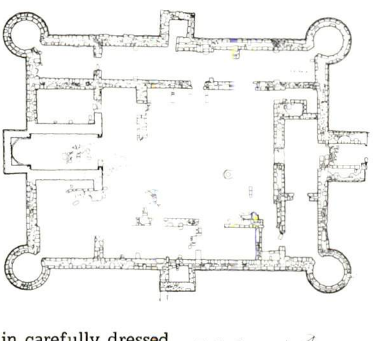

c

The Fortress Palace is a major 10th century Fatimid monument. In 1824 when Pacho visited the site and made his engravings, rather more was standing. Three rooms had vaulted roofs, while at least one of the angle towers retained a dome. In plan the palace is a rectangular structure 33 metres long and 25 metres wide with circular corner towers 5 metres across. In the centre of each side is a rectangular salient, towers on each long side, a monumental porch to the north-east, and part of a room to the south-west. There is a central courtyard 14 metres square, with an elaborate entrance complex at one end, and a suite of rooms at the other.



Part of the courtyard of the Fortress Palace.

The central room of this 'palatial' suite, with its semi-domed apse, shell squinches, engaged columns and capitals, is the focal point of the entire building, and indicates the importance of its intended occupier, a factor which is underlined by the monumental entrance; the paucity of the remaining accommodation however suggests that it was not in permanent occupation as a garrisoned residence. It may have been built as a rest house for the triumphal progress of the Fatimid Caliph al-Mu'izz on his way to Cairo in 972 AD, but this must await further investigation. With its careful construction and finely dressed stonework however, this building represents one of the important 10th century monuments in North Africa.

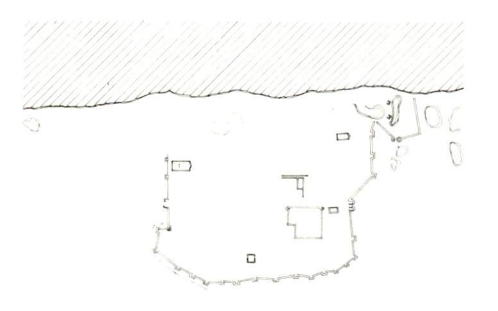


Apse with half dome on squinches in carefully dressed stone work from the Fortress Palace.





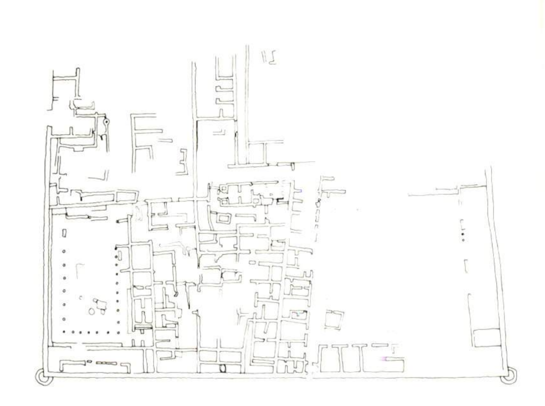
Apart from Ajdabiyah, the Eastern province of Libya has a number of early Islamic sites. These include a round tower recently discovered during excavations at Sidi Krebish, Benghazi; a bath at Driana; and remains of forts at Kharuba, Mukhili, and Medinat Buhindi, as well as in Cyrene where there is also a bath. One of the most potentially interesting is at Tocra. Excavations at this Romano-Byzantine town show that it was occupied by the Arabs when they invaded Libya early in the 8th century, and certain features indicate that it may have had considerable significance.



Plan of the site at Tocra. This Roman Byzantine town was occupied by the Arabs when they first invaded Libya in the 8th century.

Fortified palace at Tocra.

The circular towers at the northern corners of the so-called Byzantine fortress suggest that this may have received important modifications during the early Islamic period under the Umayyads. The pottery found indicates an early Islamic date, and the circular corner towers are characteristic of similar Umayyad constructions in the eastern Mediterranean area. Further archaeological investigation is required to determine the exact date and scale of the Islamic constructions and alterations to this structure.

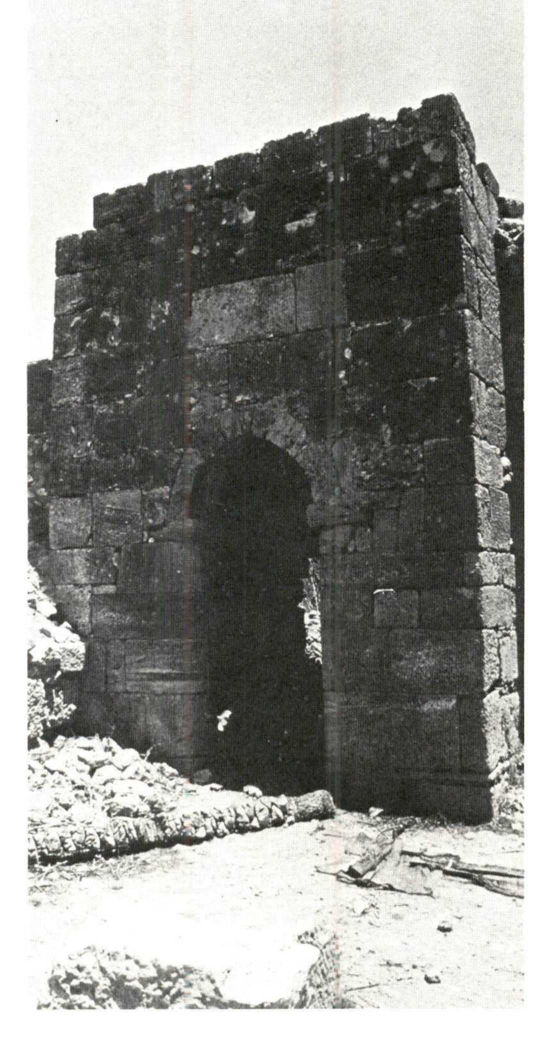


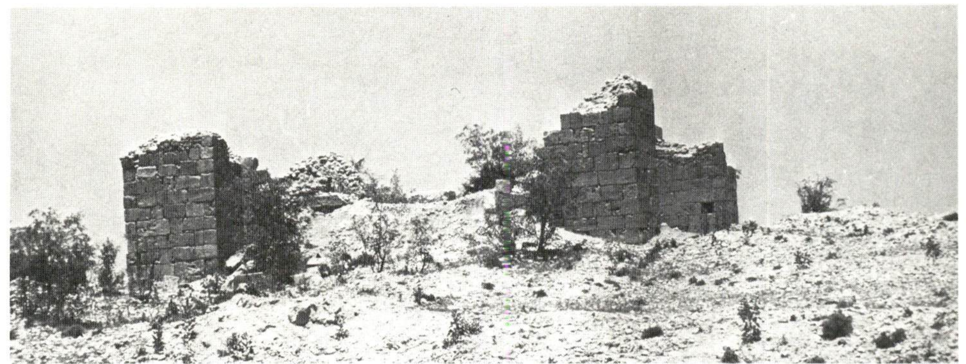
The circular corner tower of the fortified palace is characteristic of Umayyad architecture.

On a hill to the south of Leptis Magna is a mediaeval fortress popularly known as Qasr al-Hammam. Originally a Roman Byzantine structure, it was probably modified and restored by a local governor as a defence against the Bedouin, following the Banu Hilal invasion of 1050 AD. The entrance porch contains an inscription which was incised above the inner gateway and commemorates the completion of the work ordered by the amir Salim at the hands of a certain 'Abdullah in the year 473AH/1080AD. The lettering is in simple Kufic with cursive elements, but is unusually crude in its execution for a building inscription.

Fortress on the hill south of Leptis Magna known as the qasr al-Hammam. The entrance porch is probably an Arab addition to a Roman Byzantine structure.

The inscription incised above the inner gateway commemorates the completion of building work in 1080.



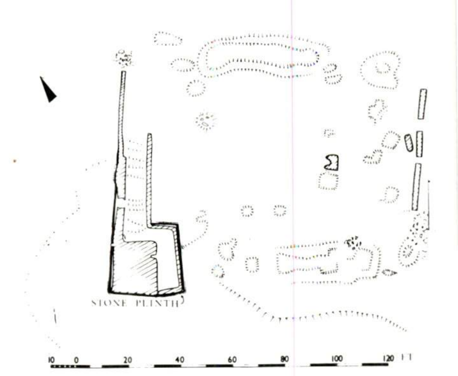




Two marble columns found at Barqa, modern al-Marj. The inscriptions belong to the Fatimid period. See *Libya Antiqua*, III, 1971.

The tombstone of Bayan ibn al-Haythan, dated 862 AD was found in the region of Tripoli, and is the oldest inscription yet found in Libya. The script is in simple Kufic with the beginnings of a foliation on certain letters. The name Bayan ibn al-Haythan is a classical Arabic name.

Zawila has a pre-Islamic origin and is on the main trans-Saharan caravan route. The mosque was built of mud brick probably in the 10th century and is similar in plan to those of Ajdabiyah and Medina Sultan. The minaret has a solid square base approached by a ramp, while on a position equivalent to the sanctuary facade are the remains of a pier with a semi-circular niche. These features indicate a Fatimid connection.



Amir	Ruler or prince.
Bir	Stepped well.
Fatimids	Dynasty of rulers of North Africa and Egypt 10–12th centuries.
Funduqs	Hotel.
Hammam	Bath.
Kufic	Form of Arabic script characterised by angular letters.
Madrasa	Theological school.
Marabout	Holy man.
Mihrab	Niche indicating direction of Mecca.
Minaret	Tower from which call to prayer is given.
Minbar	Pulpit from which the Friday sermon is given.
Qasr	Castle.
Qibla	Direction of Mecca.
Suq	Market.
Umayyads	Dynasty of rulers of Syria, North Africa and Spain, 7th–8th centuries, and later in Spain.

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